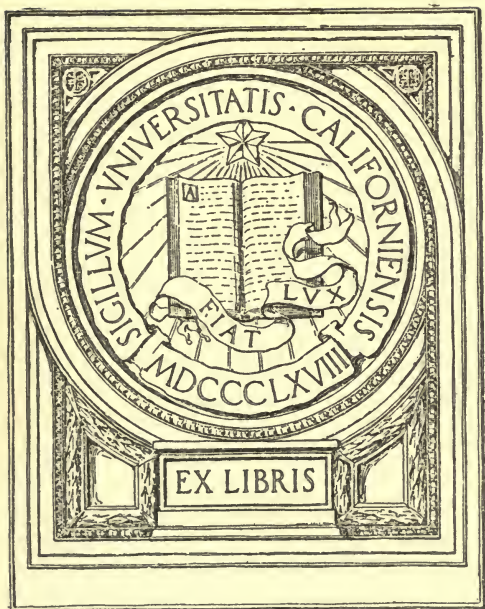


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## Honor among Thieves



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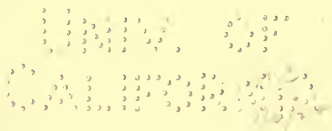


# Honor among Thieves

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'WHEN KINGS RODE TO DELHI,' 'STRANGERS  
WITHIN THE GATES,' ETC.



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*TO*  
*A. P.*

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PART I.



## CHAPTER I.

A LONG line of carriages stood at the blue door of Mr George Rivers's house in Brunswick Square, on a September morning. The heavy rain of the night had changed into a dull drizzle which dimmed the brightness of harness and buttons. The footmen's stockings were covered with splashes of mud, as they opened the carriage doors; their mistresses hurried under the awning and into the house, giving little opportunity for the crowd gathered on the pavement to admire their wedding clothes.

What the newspapers of the day styled "a marriage in high life" was attracting a number of guests, chiefly ladies. The throng increased at every moment, till it began to appear doubtful whether late arrivals would be able to get in at the door.

"Did you ever see such a crush in your life, my dear?" sighed a thin vapid-looking lady in a lilac pelisse, to a friend with yellow plumes in her bonnet. "*C'est affreuse—ça m'étouffe.*" (In those days in which England was standing alone against the might of Napoleon, it was necessary for every Englishwoman who wished to be in the fashion to besprinkle her conversation with French words and phrases, pronounced as much like English as possible.)

"La! Amelia," called a stout matron in puce to her daughter in royal blue, "hold on to me, whatever you do, or we shall be lost in this crowd."

The wearer of the yellow plumes looked round her, on the confusion of ruffs, fans, feathers nodding on bright-coloured bonnets, floating scarves which only half hid bare necks.

"What a mob! what can have brought them all here?"

"I haven't an idea," answered her friend languidly, "unless it is to see what sort of a wife Sir Charles is taking to himself."

"Amelia! Amelia! where's Mr Patten?"

"I'm sure I don't know, mamma. He was just behind me when we came in at the door."

"We'll wait for him at the top of the stairs; it won't do to lose him, and him a stranger in Town. Here's the banister: I'll hold on to it, and you hold on to me, and we'll get on famously."

"What extraordinary creatures! Where do you think they come from?" lisped the lilac pelisse to the yellow plumes.

"Friends of Mr Rivers, I should say, or perhaps relations."

"I suppose attorneys have relations," said the lilac pelisse as she entered the drawing-room. "There is Gardiner, I declare! Now we shall hear all about it."

"Ladies, ladies, I have been waiting for you this hour past!" cried a small thin man in a blue coat. "Did I not warn you to be in time?"

"It's not my fault your attorney friend has such a narrow staircase that it won't take more than three persons abreast," said the lilac pelisse.



"Do find us chairs, for we're dropping with fatigue."

"I assure you, dear madam, there would be none to be found if I had not kept two for you. Here they are. Permit me, ladies"—to a group sitting half-way up the room,—“if you would kindly allow these ladies to pass—perhaps if you would let me draw your chairs a *leettle* to one side——”

The passage was accomplished, with much fluttering of scarves—the only article of dress at that time that could flutter, owing to the scantiness of all other feminine draperies. The lilac pelisse sank upon a gilt chair in an attitude of dejection, opened a fringed reticule and took out a smelling-bottle, at which she sniffed with half-closed eyes; the lady of the yellow plumes sat upright, looked round her, and observed: “Those are better places over there.”

“But they are on the side intended for the bride's relations and friends,” said Mr Gardiner, settling his coat-tails, “and I did not think that either of you ladies would care to assume the part of a relation of our host even for an hour.”

“Has the bride any friends?” asked the yellow plumes.

“None that ever I heard of, except Mr Rivers.”

“*Tant pis pour elle*: he is an expensive friend, as we know to our cost, some of us.”

“Not I,” said Mr Gardiner, flicking a speck of powder from his sleeve. “I have had nothing to do with him in the way of my own affairs, I am thankful to say. We sit upon a Committee together, and I am bound to own he is a good man of business—yes, a good man of business, undoubtedly.”

“I suppose he has made a *coup* in marrying his

niece to Sir Charles, though I can't imagine how it benefits him."

"The young lady is not his niece, strictly speaking," corrected Mr Gardiner; "she is a distant cousin of his wife's. But her marriage with Sir Charles is a good stroke of business for Mr Rivers, as you say."

"Tell us the story, and make haste about it, or they will be beginning the service before we know why they are going to be married," commanded the yellow plumes.

"Can't you see that he is positively dying to tell you?" said the lilac pelisse, opening her eyes. "Leave him to himself for a few minutes, and it is bound to come out or he will burst."

Mr Gardiner pretended to glance round him. "I must be sure that we are not overheard—you know that discretion——"

"Pooh, man! they're all too busy telling scandals to each other to listen to you," said the lady with the plumes. "Sit between us, and I will hold up my fan if you will be easier for it; but we must have the story."

Mr Gardiner threw another look over his shoulder, this time in earnest, and saw that no one "who counted" was within earshot. It was as the lady said—all the assembly was too busy to listen, those who were so lucky as to have found chairs talking with all their might, and the rest absorbed in looking for places. The room was full of the heavy sound like the falling of water into a shallow tank, which is made by many voices in different keys and varying intonations. Every now and then above all rose the shrill call of the lady in puce-coloured satin,

demanding whether Amelia saw Mr Patten yet, or the deep bass of a white-headed old gentleman in the far corner, who wanted to know what his neighbour had to say about the news from Germany.

"Of course you are aware," began Mr Gardiner, with a preliminary clearing of his throat, "that our friend here has been trying for many years to get himself and his wife received into society. For many years he has laboured without much success, his wife being, *entre nous*, partly an invalid and entirely a goose. But last winter they brought out a paragon of a daughter, who plays the harp quite well, and is as good and sensible as she is lovely."

"I declare, Gardiner, you seem *épris* with her yourself," said the lilac pelisse. "Have you made your proposals in form to M. le Papa?"

"Your ladyship is pleased to mock an old bachelor who lost his heart to all your adorable sex too long ago for Miss Jane Rivers to be able to wound it. But she has worked sad havoc among the younger generation. Lady Dunster happened to notice her one day, made acquaintance, and took up the young beauty with that charming enthusiasm which we all know. She carried her to many places where Papa and Mamma would not have been received. Young Egerton saw Miss Jane at Lady Dunster's house——"

"Young Egerton? What! Lady Maria's grandson?"

"The good one, who plays the flute and goes to church on Sundays?"

"Precisely, ladies. He fell head over ears in love with her——"

"Then she must be a miracle," said the lady in the

lilac pelisse. "I could as soon imagine a codfish the victim of a *grande passion* as Mr Egerton."

Mr Gardiner waved his hand a little impatiently. "He swears he will marry her; Lady Maria swears her grandson shall not marry an attorney's daughter. As you know, his private income is not enough to keep him in shoe-strings; and though he had been promised the reversion of a snug little place in a Government office, Lady Maria sets to work to prevent its going to him if he persists in marrying his *innamorata*. Love in a cottage does not suit Egerton; he writes a beautiful letter of farewell to Miss Jane, who is preparing to languish in a decline, when Fate puts a trump card into her papa's hand——"

"I'll be bound he had it up his sleeve," said the lady with the plumes.

At this point there was a stir at the entrance to the room, and a man-servant announced "Lady Maria Vane." A moment before, it might have been thought impossible for another person to walk up the crowded gangway between the rows of gilt chairs, but at the sight of the lady who stood in the doorway the company appeared to shrink together, leaving ample space for her progress. For many years Lady Maria had been used to obtaining what she wanted, whether it were the best place in the room or some more solid advantage, and no one would have disputed it with her twice. There was no need for young Mr Rivers to turn round upon the bevy of ladies for whom he was endeavouring to find places and wave his arms to and fro, as if he were driving a flock of geese, in order to sweep the passage clear. The passage was clear, and all that remained for him to do was to stand out of the way.

Little Mr Patten having with much difficulty climbed



up the stairs and rejoined Amelia and her mother, stood huddled with them on one side of the door, waiting until Lady Maria should pass on. The two ladies could not imagine why such a stir was made over a gaunt old woman, with thick eyebrows, wearing an ermine cloak that dated from the reign of George II. They were not of the society which trembled before Lady Maria Vane, and never having been further into the country than to Barnes, they were not struck, as some outsiders might have been, by the likeness to an old hawk watching its prey, as she glanced to right and left.

Having advanced three steps into the room, she stood surveying the company through a long-handled glass, ignoring young Mr Rivers, who was bowing with as much grace as is possible to a very stout youth in a very tight neckcloth, with the ends of a very large wedding favour sticking almost into his eyes.

Down the lane between the gilt chairs hurried the master of the house, a florid, good-looking man with powdered hair and a bunch of seals at his fob, followed by a stout lady in grey satin, with a short neck and an immense bouquet.

"Lady Maria! it distresses me inexpressibly to see your ladyship standing. Allow me to conduct you to your place."

"Ah, Rivers, you there? Quite the gentleman, as usual." The harsh tones of Lady Maria's voice were audible all over the room, as she swept up the gangway with a nod to host and hostess.

"See him putting her into the arm-chair," murmured the lilac pelisse; "see how she handles her fan as if she were dying to lay it about his knuckles. As I live, she is making him kneel down to slide the footstool under her feet."

Various late-comers, who had not succeeded in finding places near the door, followed in Lady Maria's wake up the gangway. Among these were an elderly lady with an ear-trumpet, and a small dainty creature in white, with rose-coloured ribbons in her turban, who insinuated themselves into chairs just in front of Mr Gardiner and his party.

"Charlotte Winslow!" said the lilac pelisse to her friend, in a tone that did not suggest pleasure. "She always contrives to get into a good place, wherever you meet her."

The girl turned round, with a little affected laugh. "You here, dear Lady Ramsay! and Mrs Clifford too! This is delightful. And Mr Gardiner—I was hoping to see you, sir. It is an age since I have been anywhere, and I want you to tell me all about everybody. Mamma is so deaf, she never hears any news, and I feel as if I had been buried alive."

"Always at Miss Winslow's service, but there is one item of fashionable intelligence that I must learn from her. When is the wedding to be?"

Charlotte held up her white muff to hide an imaginary blush.

"The date is not fixed. Perhaps in the spring—but Mr Daniels is very impatient."

"Who could blame him?" asked the old beau gallantly; but Lady Ramsay brought him back to his duty with a peremptory "Pray explain what you meant by a trump card, Mr Gardiner; we are waiting for the conclusion of the story."

Mr Gardiner, who would have preferred a flirtation with Miss Charlotte, tried to recall himself to the business in hand.

"Er—yes, it was, as you say, a trump card. Some

wealthy old woman died who was a distant relation of our hostess. Of course, it was hoped that her money would go to that quarter, but when they came to read the will, it was found that every penny was left to some third or fourth cousin, a little country girl whose existence every one had forgotten."

"And how was that a trump card for the attorney?"

"Because the old woman appointed him guardian and trustee, thinking, I suppose, that it would render his chagrin more acute. But little did she know the resourcefulness of our friend. Off he goes to Lady Maria, says that he heard she is looking out for a bride with a fortune for Sir Charles Mendip, and that if he consents to his ward marrying one of her grandsons, he presumes that she will have no objection to his daughter marrying the other. So it is all settled, after a good deal of haggling. Sir Charles marries Miss Honor Basset to-day. Mr Egerton marries Miss Jane Rivers next month."

"I thought Sir Charles was vowed against matrimony; Lady Maria has been *au désespoir* for the last two years because she could not settle him in life."

"It was not only he who objected; heiresses were not inclined for a bridegroom who spends half his time in a stable, and the rest at Elystan House."

"Sir Charles knows by now that he must have money, and that his lawyer and his agent can squeeze out no more for him, and that a girl of fifteen is likely to be less exacting than a maturer bride."

"Less likely to make difficulties with la Belle Amazone," said Charlotte, who was leaning over the back of her chair listening. "What is it?" in a pettish tone to the lady in puce, who after standing beside her

for some moments, trying to attract her attention, had ventured to touch her elbow.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but there's some empty seats beyond you. If you were to let us pass——"

Charlotte, with an air of annoyance, pulled her scarf round her, but made no other effort to facilitate the lady's passage.

"You come next me, Mr Patten," bade the puce satin, "and then Amelia. Lord! I wish I was as slim as you, ma'am"—with an effort to conciliate Charlotte, who was ostentatiously shaking out the ribbons on her dress.

Between fear of entangling himself in those ribbons, and shame at what he saw in passing,—for Charlotte's dress was in the height of fashion, which is to say that there was as little of it as could be,—poor Mr Patten would have given much to be allowed to retreat to the back of the room. But with the lady in puce satin keeping her eye fixed upon him over her shoulder as she struggled past Charlotte and her mother, and Miss Amelia urging him from behind, there was no chance of escape. He was crimson in the face by the time that he was pushed and pulled into a gilt chair, and the puce satin, leaning across him, was explaining to Charlotte's mother, "I hope we're not crowding you, ma'am, but these are the only seats I could spy, and I wished most particularly for my cousin here to have a good view. He lives down at Osmundsbury, which is as quiet as a cemetery, and he's never seen a fashionable wedding in his life."

Charlotte's mother, being deaf, replied only with a smile.

"Not but what he's so near-sighted, I'm afraid he'll see nothing as it is," went on the lady. "It's a plaguy



inconvenient affliction not to be able to see beyond the tip of your nose, and——”

Lady Maria's harsh voice rose above the clack of tongues.

“What are we waiting for? I am here.”

“Lady Maria won't endure being kept waiting,” said Lady Ramsay, standing up to look round her. “She will make the bride pay for this.”

“The bride is ready and waiting behind that door,” Mr Gardiner assured her. “I caught a glimpse of her and her bridesmaids, ten minutes ago, when Mrs Rivers went out, that way, to get another cushion for Lady Maria.”

“Do tell us something about the bride,” cried Charlotte. “Is it true that she ran about barefoot, and milked cows, and drove pigs to market?”

“Sir Charles and she should live in harmony, their tastes being similar,” said Lady Ramsay. “While he is in the stable, she can be in the cowshed.”

“Will he continue to keep racehorses?” asked Mrs Clifford.

Mr Gardiner solemnly shook his head.

“I doubt it. I believe the settlements were very carefully drawn.”

“Then the bride and her fortune are not absolutely at Sir Charles's mercy?”

“If she dies without an heir, by the old woman's will the money is to pass to Mrs Rivers. Our friend had every reason to watch over his ward's interests. He met his match, however. I am told that he vows he has transacted business with all sorts and conditions of men, from Jews to King's Counsel, and that he found a Duke's daughter the wariest of all at driving a bargain.”

"I wonder he did not marry the girl to his son, and make sure of the money. A healthy country girl is not likely to die without heirs."

"Our friend is too clever for that," said Mr Gardiner. "People would have said—what you may easily imagine—if he had married his ward at fifteen to Young Hopeful, and some busybody might have stirred up the Court of Chancery to interfere. If he had waited a year or two, Miss might have discovered her own value, and insisted upon choosing for herself. Now, whatever may be said of Sir Charles, he comes of good family and has a title; if he does not break his neck his wife may be a Viscountess in a year or two, for it seems certain that Lord Dunster can have no children, and he is heir-presumptive, as the title goes in the female line."

"Can you tell me, ma'am, why the scarlet rope is stretched along the end of the room?" the lady in puce satin asked of Charlotte's mother, who smiled again and shook her head. Charlotte, who had been playing with the fringe of her sash, affronted because the other two ladies were engaging all Mr Gardiner's attention, leaned across her to answer—

"Some say it is to keep off the bridegroom's creditors, ma'am, but others believe that it is to prevent him from being overwhelmed by the embraces of the bride's family."

"Here he comes." There was a general whisper and movement as two gentlemen came in at the farther door. The one, a man of six or seven and twenty, who looked steadily in front of him, with an air in which severe disapproval was blent with a deprecation of all responsibility for the condition of his charge, was evidently the good Mr Egerton.

The other, some two or three years younger, was tall and unusually well made. His face might have been handsome but for its lowering, sullen look, and for a redness for which hunting was not alone responsible. As he passed up the room his unsteady walk was noticeable.

"Now we know why the red cord was put," whispered Lady Ramsay to Mr Gardiner; "the bridegroom will never be able to get off his knees without its help."

"A bridegroom is apt to overdo it," said Mr Gardiner; "you remember the Prince at his wedding——"

"Here's the bride, popped in by the other door. She has not kept him waiting long, at any rate," interrupted Lady Ramsay. "The parson is evidently as anxious as any of them to get it over. He is taking the service at a hand-gallop."

"I thought the bride had a strong Somersetshire accent," observed Charlotte. "I can't hear a word—can you, Mr Gardiner?"

"It would take a strong voice to be heard above all the chatter," said Lady Ramsay, with a curl of her lip. "Pray, where do they spend the honeymoon, Mr Gardiner?"

"A friend of Lady Maria's has lent them a house in the wilds of Sussex."

"I wonder Sir Charles did not kick at that. Brighton or Tunbridge Wells——"

"If your ladyship looks at the map, you will see that Flamington Park is not far from the country seat to which, according to a paragraph in 'The Morning Post,' a certain beautiful leader of fashion went down with her lord at the beginning of last week."

Lady Ramsay nodded her head significantly.

"So that is it."

"I'm thankful to the clergyman for making haste," yawned Mrs Clifford, who, half-asleep, had missed the last part of the conversation. "The heat is stifling. Why did they fix upon the drawing-room as the place for the ceremony?"

"I really can't say," replied Mr Gardiner, taking snuff under cover of his handkerchief. "It may be that our friend wished to get all the advantages he could from the special licence; or it may have been a delicate attention to Lady Maria, who is supposed not to have entered a church for fifty years. But you may remember that a young lady of fashion was married in her mother's drawing-room the other day, because the Duchess was confined to the house, and, I am told, on hearing of it, our friend discovered that his wife's health prevents her from going out unless the wind is absolutely in the right quarter. One must be in the fashion, you know."

"You satirical creature!"

"I declare the girl must be positively half-witted," cried Miss Charlotte. "She never gave her hand till the clergyman pulled it out from under that ridiculous thick veil."

"Mechlin at twenty guineas the yard," murmured Mrs Clifford sleepily. "I wonder where she got it?"

"A little bashfulness is not unbecoming in a bride, even if it is out of date," said Lady Ramsay, with a repressive look at Miss Charlotte. "I wonder how much will be left of it before she comes back to town."

"If she takes lessons from la Belle Amazone——"

"Now they're coming down the room!" cried the matron in puce. "Hold your head to one side, Amelia, or those thingumbobs in your bonnet will get in the



way of Mr Patten seeing anything—or let him step past you. You take a good look at 'em, Mr Patten.”

But Mr Patten, good man, with one hand over his dim eyes and large round spectacles, was unaffectedly praying for the child now turned into a wife, and saw nothing of the bridal procession. “I hope no one noticed him,” said the matron to her husband afterwards; “Mrs Rivers would think it so odd of him to be saying his prayers in her drawing-room—she might take him for a Methodist. People are so particular about what you do in the drawing-room, though to be sure 'twas she who began it, you might say, by having a wedding there.”

“Oh, I can't see anything,” complained Miss Charlotte, as some of the gentlemen who had been standing in the gangway crowded back on either side to let the procession pass. “What a plague it is to be so short! Do give me your hand, Mr Gardiner.”

“What, is it you, Miss Winslow?” One of the blue-coated gentlemen turned round.

“Oh, Mr Wood! let me hold by your shoulder.”

“Charlotte! Pray don't!” sighed her mother, but without hope of being obeyed; Charlotte was accustomed to take her own way. With the help of the two gentlemen, she scrambled in a moment on to the seat of her gilt chair and stood there, like a Dresden china figure on a pedestal, so pretty and dainty that most of the masculine eyes in the company turned from the bride to gaze at her.

The matron in puce in a loud whisper bade Amelia look the other way.

A long murmur of comments and exclamations followed the bridal pair as they went down the room, like the wave that follows a ship.

"Yes, real Mechlin."

"And French satin."

"There's Miss Rivers——"

"The bridesmaid with the big brown eyes and fair curls?"

"Yes; I remember seeing her with Lady Dunster. She really is a pretty creature."

"Rather hard on the bride to set such a beauty close to her."

"Harder still on Mendip, eh?"

"Did you see *le beau cousin* keeping his eye on him?"

"Could you see the bride?"

"Impossible to see anything under that veil, except that her hair is red."

"Poor thing! no wonder that she wore a thick veil, with that hair," said Charlotte kindly, giving a little toss to her own black ringlets. "It must be terrible to have red hair."

"Not so terrible as to have large feet," said a harsh voice. Charlotte, turning round with a start that nearly precipitated her from her chair, beheld Lady Maria, who had stopped close beside her on her way down the room.

"I thought it was Lady Ramsay's brat, and was about to beg her mother to teach her that young ladies do not climb upon chairs before she brought her out again, but now I see it is you. Your muff will fall on the ground—— No, I beg your pardon, I see that white lump is one of your feet."

"Indeed, ma'am, my feet are none too large." Charlotte's narrow face flushed red with mortification, and the tears rose to her eyes.

"You think so?" Lady Maria turned to the host,

standing by her side, with an arm extended until it should please her ladyship to take it. "Rivers, undo my shoe."

Mr Rivers coloured, gasped, stammered, but bent down and unfastened the button of a velvet slipper. Without another word, Lady Maria set her foot on the chair for all who would to see. Charlotte's plump sandalled foot, not unduly large, but not small for one of her height, did not bear comparison with the foot in Lady Maria's shabby black silk stocking, so small that like that of a Spanish woman, it might have been measured against a cigar.

"A little kitten could hide under my instep," said Lady Maria, setting her foot down again. "That is the sort of foot to exhibit if you wish to make a show of yourself, child. But I recommend you to try modesty for a change, if you can; you have not enough looks to be worth setting on a pedestal. Yes, you can put my shoe on, Rivers."

"La! is this the way the quality behave?" gasped the matron in puce.

"Yes, sometimes," said Lady Maria over her shoulder as she went on. "But I should recommend you madam, to remain as you are, *franchement canaille*."

## CHAPTER II.

A LARGE yellow travelling carriage was waiting at Mr Rivers's door; upstairs, the bride was being stripped of her white satin and lace; downstairs, in the hall, Sir Charles, with a gloomy countenance, was enduring the congratulations and the mockery of his friends. All, whether they spoke from experience or not, were convinced that he would find matrimony "a d——d bore"; the only difference of opinion was whether or not the bride's fortune were enough to atone for the inevitable inconvenience.

"Cheer up!" said a tall youth with his hair dressed so as to suggest a porcupine. "After all, there is one consolation—you'll have no relations-in-law except old Rivers."

"Gad! he's quite equal to costing you as much as father and mother and brothers and sisters-in-law," said another.

"If Lady Mendip was brought up by him, you'll find her keeping a tight hand on the purse-strings, my boy."

"She never saw him till three months ago," said Sir Charles. "She was brought up by two old women—her nurse and some sort of a *gouvernante*—and she



was pleased to make it one of the conditions of marrying me that I should take her back to Somersetshire to see them again."

"Not a bad place to leave a wife when you're tired of her, eh, Mendip?"

"——, if she keeps me waiting much longer, I shall start without her," fumed Sir Charles, pulling out his watch. "You—there,"—to a footman who was passing,—“go up and tell Lady Mendip that if she does not come down soon, we shall not get to Flamington Park before dark."

Mr Wood began to tell a good story about a bridegroom whose bride kept him waiting; and broke off, just as he reached the climax, with a suppressed oath, in dismay at finding a young lady was standing at his elbow. He need not have disturbed himself; Jane Rivers, as good as she was beautiful, did not understand a word of what she overheard, and was wondering innocently what there could be in it to send the whole party into guffaws of laughter. Sir Charles was leaning against the banisters, Mr Gardiner was wiping his eyes; the only person who did not share in the general amusement was Mr Egerton, who, having begun to laugh before he caught sight of her, was now looking as severe as none can do but a man who has been caught in the act.

"Lady Mendip is very sorry to have detained you so long, sir," Jane said, addressing the bridegroom; "she will be down in a very few minutes."

Sir Charles muttered something meant for civility, and Mr Egerton came forward.

"Let me take you back to your mother, Jane."

But Jane, usually quick to respond to a look or a sign from her lover, stood her ground.

"She is in distress over a letter she has just received, saying that old Miss Lester is dead. She was looking forward so much to going back to Witham and seeing her and the old nurse again. Otherwise, I am sure she would have been dressed long ago."

"It doesn't matter, ma'am—plenty of time—don't trouble yourself," mumbled Sir Charles, flushing a deeper red under the gaze of the soft brown eyes.

Jane stepped back, as if to go upstairs—then, with a great effort, turned away from the arm that Mr Egerton had been extending, and confronted Sir Charles once more.

"You *will* be kind to her, sir? she is so young, and so lonely. Indeed she has a most sweet disposition."

"I'll—I'll do my best," faltered the bridegroom, and, for the moment, he intended it.

"Jane! what are you doing down here?" and Mr Rivers, coming out of the drawing-room, seized upon his daughter. "I am surprised at you. Here is Lady Maria asking for you, and I told her you were assisting at your cousin's toilette. Is she ready?"

"She was getting into her gown when I left her, sir. It took longer than you had expected, as Dawson is ill."

Mr Rivers's frown deepened. He liked everything to be done according to his arrangements, and it was a serious annoyance that the maid engaged for the bride had been taken so ill, on the previous night, that the apothecary declared it would be as much as her life was worth to send her down to Sussex with Lady Mendip.

"They will find plenty of servants in the house, and one of them can act as lady's-maid," said Lady Maria, who was enthroned in an arm-chair beside the draw-

ing-room door, where she could see and hear all that went on. "I have no patience with these young ladies who are so helpless that they can do nothing for themselves. Much better not to take an Abigail on the journey—either she will be sick, or she will get into mischief."

"I assure your ladyship that my cousin is not helpless," cried Jane's soft voice. "She is not used to the prevailing fashion in dress, but she can do many things——"

"That are not part of a young lady's accomplishments," finished Lady Maria, "just as my grandson can perform many tricks not usually included in a gentleman's education."

"I assure your ladyship that you will find my dear niece the most dutiful of grandchildren." Mr Rivers had planted himself beside the arm-chair, snuff-box in hand.

"Niece, you said?" Two small keen grey eyes, cold and hard as agates, looked up at him from among a network of wrinkles. "She may be my grandson's wife, and therefore my granddaughter, but how do you make her your niece? She's your wife's second cousin once removed."

"My niece in affection, I might say, dear madam—almost my daughter."

"An affection that allowed you to leave her to the charity of her grandfather's old servants, till you found out that she was Miss Hussey's heiress." The old lady spoke without a touch of any emotion, as if stating some fact to which she and every one else must be indifferent.

"Madam!" he protested, reddening, "Lady Mendip's health as a child was so delicate that it was the best

chance for her to be left in the country air. A poor man with a large family cannot afford to journey up and down between London and Somersetshire. I had every reason to believe she was well and happy."

"And as the governess and the nurse shared what they had with her, she did not starve or go naked."

"Your ladyship misconceives. It was impossible for me, with Mrs Rivers's weak health, and so large a family of my own, to give her such advantages as Jane has had, for instance. But indeed I doubt whether they would not have been wasted upon her, so far," pursued Mr Rivers, who, finding himself allowed to say so much without interruption, began to think that he was making an impression. "She is very childlike and unformed. She will give Sir Charles no trouble by taking a line of her own. She will see with his eyes, be guided by his wishes. She has no taste for the gay world, to endanger their happiness. While she was under my roof, she preferred a game of play with my children in the nursery to the society of our friends in the drawing-room. You will be able to mould her as you please, but I question whether she will ever have any capacity for anything beyond the sphere of the nursery—when Heaven has been pleased to bless her and Sir Charles with children."

The grey eyes contracted to the size of beads, the fierce black eyebrows were drawn down over them. "Don't prate to me about Heaven, man, after the work you and I have done to-day."

"I am at a loss for your Ladyship's meaning."

"They call you a good man—you're no gay Lothario—you don't keep a mistress at Richmond or Twicken-



ham, or any of those places where men keep such treasures, and you go to church every Sunday——”

“Madam, I—I——” Mr Rivers was purple and choking with indignation.

“I was divorced from my first husband before I was twenty, and I never go to church. If I did, I should go there no more, after helping you to deliver that innocent child, tied and bound, to my grandson. No, man, I don’t want moral sentiments. If an attorney can have a soul, you’ve damned yours by this marriage. Mine was damned long ago, and I was bound to do all I could for my grandson.”

Mr Rivers’s outraged delicacy might have overcome his respect for a Duke’s daughter sufficiently for him to have made some reply to Lady Maria, if a stir and bustle on the stairs had not caused a diversion. Jane was leading down a little figure in a very large bonnet with white ostrich plumes, and a white velvet coat, followed by tearful farewells from a little group of children and servants on the landing above.

“Dear Honor, write every day, and tell us how you like being married.”

“Come back soon, and we’ll dance ‘Lavender Bunches.’”

“Oh, Miss, I would say your Ladyship, we all do hope as how you’ll live happy for ever.”

“My dear Lady Mendip, you positively must come and ask for Lady Maria’s blessing before you hurry away with Sir Charles.” Mr Rivers had recovered himself, having decided that Lady Maria’s extraordinary language must be due to over-excitement.

For a moment the old woman stared at the little three-cornered face under the wedding plumes as if she had never seen it before.

"Not pretty," she murmured, "but I was not pretty."

The hazel eyes looked steadfastly back into the grey, and Lady Maria shivered and turned away.

"Good luck to you, child. Your guardian has done his best for you. It remains to be seen what your husband will do."

When Mr Rivers came back from putting the bride into the carriage, with all due ceremony, Lady Maria was standing at the head of the stairs.

"Let me assist your Ladyship. Your carriage is waiting."

The old lady burst into a shrill laugh.

"Wrong again, my worthy friend. I don't need your support to walk downstairs. It was not wine that made me tell you the truth, a few minutes ago, though I had been drinking the health of the happy pair in your excellent Burgundy."

"Your Ladyship need not be afraid of it. I am told by connoisseurs that it is good, but I drink very little of it myself—the doctor tells me that my gout——"

"Gout? What business has the like of you with gout? That's for your betters. But if the wine upsets your stomach, you can spare me a few bottles—just put them in the carriage next time you send it round. Are you there, Egerton? If Mr Rivers can marry his niece in this style, he can make a good settlement on his daughter, so it may not be long before you are the happiest of men—like your cousin."

### CHAPTER III.

SOME twenty years before the wedding guests came to the house in Brunswick Square, two foolish young people had made a love-match.

Adrian Basset was the last male of an old family whose estates had been drunk and gambled away when he was a child in his mother's arms. What matter? He meant to be a great painter, and win fame, and perhaps, incidentally, enough money to buy back the old house and some of the green fields and rolling hills about it. In the meantime, having scarcely two half-crowns to jingle one against the other in his pocket, he had married an orphan girl with as long a pedigree and as empty a purse as his own.

They were impossibly and unreasonably happy for a few years, during which sometimes they had not enough to eat. Then Honor's baby was born, and she died. So long as she lived, Adrian never dared to make the venture of which he had dreamed since boyhood, and go to seek his fortune in London; she would have pined for green lanes and spreading trees amid the wilderness of streets. Now that happiness was gone for ever, ambition revived.

In a little cottage on the property that once belonged

to his grandfather, lived two old women, the governess who had taught his father his letters and the nurse who nursed him as a baby. A very small pension had been secured to each, before the Basset estates were eaten up by creditors, great and small. These two faithful friends were ready to take charge of the baby Honor. So far as he knew, Adrian had no kin left to him, and his wife's only living relative was a cousin married to a lawyer in London.

Honor never saw her father from the day when he put her into the motherly crook of Nurse Tanner's arms, and Miss Lester, through her tears, pronounced her a true Basset. The remittances which he promised to send from London came more and more irregularly, and ceased altogether after Honor was about five years old. A long interval of silence was followed by a formal intimation to Miss Lester that Adrian Basset had died of typhus fever in a London hospital, and that what effects he had were sold to pay the expenses of his funeral.

Miss Lester, acting on instructions received from Adrian before he went away, wrote to the lawyer in London. His reply, when it came, contained much good advice on the subject of imprudent marriages, but no help of any kind.

So the two women brought up the child at their own expense. What is barely enough for two can be made to suffice for three if the two "have learned to contrive," as Miss Lester put it—which in this case meant learning how to do without every comfort and many necessities.

For herself Miss Lester regretted nothing, but she often sighed over her powerlessness to give the last of



the Bassets such an education as befitted a young lady. It was useless to think of teaching her "the use of the globes" or to play upon the spinet, when neither a pair of globes nor a spinet was to be found within ten miles of Witham. As for the elaborate devices in fancy-work which Adrian's aunts—dead for over thirty years—had performed under her direction, there was no money to buy the materials.

What she could give to her pupil, she did: Honor learned to read, write, and cipher, to spin and to sew with exquisite neatness, and to hold herself upright as a dart. "A lady is known by her carriage," said Miss Lester, "rather than by her attire." It was a convenient theory, since Honor wore homespun in winter and cotton in summer, like the village girls; but she wore it with a difference, thanks to Miss Lester's training and the long line of ancestors behind her. She sang naturally, with no more art than a blackbird.

Nurse Tanner taught her to wash and mend lace; there were still some rags and scraps that had belonged to Madam Basset, who used to buy a hundred pounds' worth of it whenever the pedlar's friend made a good run to France. The wife of a neighbouring farmer, whose family for several generations had lived on Basset land, taught her to milk, and to make butter and cheese. Miss Lester tolerated this, remembering that old Madam Basset would be in her dairy at five o'clock every morning till she was past seventy. But on one point she stood firm: there must be no intimacy between Honor and any of the young girls of the neighbourhood. If Miss Basset could not have friends in what should have been her own rank, she should not stoop to any others.

So the child grew up, happily enough because she was naturally light-hearted, and had withal to keep her busy all day long.

When she was fifteen, a gentleman with a wig and a gold snuff-box drove out from Frome in a gig, and told her that he was her cousin's husband, and she must come to London to live with them, because an old lady whom she had never seen had left her a great deal of money.

Honor felt as if her head had been a little dizzy ever since hearing the news. For a girl who did not go into Frome once a year, the long journey to London, the meeting more strange people in a day than she had ever seen in her whole life, was so overwhelming that the grief of parting with her two old friends was deadened. She had been as it were half-alive, her senses dulled, her brain torpid, for some weeks after being brought to Brunswick Square. Mr Rivers, seeing her sit silent at his table or in his drawing-room, never speaking of her own accord, often replying at random or not at all to what was said to her, jumped to the conclusion that she was little better than half-witted. Well, it mattered little; she seemed good-natured, the children were very fond of her—she would make Sir Charles an excellent wife.

He was quite prepared for what he called "a little childishness" when he had to explain to her that she must marry Sir Charles. But there had been no tears, no blushes, no "girlish flutterings" such as were expected of every well-bred young lady in her situation. She was so dense that it took a long time to make her understand him. Then she asked simply—

"Why must I marry?"

"My dear Honor! every young lady should marry,

of course. What would become of the world if we all lived in single blessedness?"

"Miss Lester has not married," said Honor, with a curious sidelong look of her hazel eyes that made her guardian vaguely uncomfortable. "Nor has Jane, and she is older than I am."

"Jane's turn will come, my dear, after she has been your bridesmaid—and Miss Lester is in a very different position from you. You would not like to live in poverty and loneliness."

"I don't think she is lonely, because she had me and Nurse. She is poor—but she can't be as poor as you were, when my father died, because you said you were too poor to take care of me."

Mr Rivers coughed violently. "My dear Honor! you don't understand—but there! how could I expect it at your age? But perhaps you can understand this. Miss Lester has been very good to you; you would like to give her and your nurse something to make their old age comfortable. When you marry, you will have money of your own to spend, and you will be able to do something for them."

"I thought I had money of my own."

"Not to spend, my dear, not to spend—not until you are of age, at any rate, and you know how long that will be."

"If I marry, shall I have it?"

"Certainly, my dear. As your guardian, of course, I shall take care that a proper yearly income is settled on you, so that you can buy pretty things for yourself, and do what your generous heart dictates for your friends."

Mr Rivers patted the small brown hand on the arm of the big chair that he had set for her when she came

into his study. Honor put both hands up to her head to adjust a ribbon.

"If I may go down to Witham when I am married, to see them again, I will marry Sir Charles," she said, and she said no more, sitting with eyes fixed on her shoe-buckles while Mr Rivers painted her future in the brightest colours.

Having obtained the bride's consent, it was advisable to hurry on the wedding as much as possible. Honor submitted to all the requirements of dressmakers and milliners without appearing to be interested in any of the preparations. Only once did she make any comment upon what was arranged for her, and that was when she heard that the wedding was to take place in the drawing-room.

"I thought people were always married in church," she said.

Mrs Rivers was horrified at the idea; a church was all very well for the servants and the poor, but every one knew that *le bon ton* required people of fashion to be married by special licence.

Sir Charles on his side was quite as indifferent, though not so amenable. If there were no other way of getting money, as his grandmother was so anxious to tie him up, she might see to the whole business; he did not mean to sit for hours in a stuffy office listening to lawyers' gibberish, or to kick his heels in the attorney's drawing-room making pretty speeches to a freckled-faced chit from the country.

Mr Rivers felt he was doing his duty nobly by his ward, in battles fought with Lady Maria and her lawyer over the marriage settlements. His conscience was clear, therefore, and he took it as a man of the world when friends and acquaintance on all sides told



him that Sir Charles's "affair" with a married lady was being flaunted without a pretence of disguise. So long as Honor's husband was unable to squander her fortune, it could matter nothing if he broke her heart.

Yet the attorney experienced what was almost a qualm, one day, when his own daughter Jane gathered courage to ask him whether the wedding could not be postponed until Honor were a little older. "She seems not to understand what — what it means — and Sir Charles——"

"My dear Jane, I should hope that no right-minded young woman would understand what matrimony means before she is married. The suggestion is most unbecoming."

Then, appeased by seeing how Jane's blushes enhanced her beauty, he added in a kindly tone—

"I am sure, however, that my Jane could never mean to insinuate anything inconsistent with female delicacy. My love, you must realise that your cousin is very different from yourself—an amiable girl, but with no intellectual powers. No delay could give her more intelligence."

For the first time in her life, Jane Rivers ventured to argue with her father.

"She is not sixteen, sir, and has lived very retired, but it is surprising what she notices. She is shy before you, but when she talks to us of what she sees and hears in a drive with Mamma, she makes us laugh and cry by turns."

"I can quite understand," said Mr Rivers, in his most pompous manner, "that we must make allowances for a little country girl who has never spoken to a gentleman in her life except the parson and the apothecary."

“Not even those, sir,” said Jane simply, “for she was never ill, and so never needed the apothecary, and the parson rode over once a fortnight to read service in the church, and then rode away again. It seems”—Jane caught her breath, but went on bravely—“cruel to marry her to Sir Charles next week.”

She dared not look in her father’s face, but to her relief his voice was smooth and bland as before.

“Has my Jane been reading silly novels, and learned from them that a father must be a tyrant? She knows that he has done his utmost to secure a happy marriage for her, and can she think that he would be cruel to an orphan left in his charge?”

Poor Jane melted into tears, and Mr Rivers pursued his advantage.

“If you do not trust me, my child, ask your mother: she should understand what goes to make a wife happy. Has she ever attempted one word of remonstrance on this marriage?”

It was as undeniable that Mrs Rivers was a very happy wife as that she would never have attempted a remonstrance with her husband on any subject whatever.

“Dry your tears, my love. Too much sensibility and romance is natural at your age, but you must learn to be reasonable. I promise you that I will watch your cousin most carefully, and that if her manner alters, if her spirits seem affected, I will not attempt to force her inclination.”

“Oh, sir, your goodness! I beg your pardon! I have been very wrong!” Jane’s tears would not allow her to speak coherently.

“Where is your cousin now? Let us go and find

her, and if we find her in tears, we will make sure that Sir Charles has not caused them."

When a surprise visit to the nursery found Honor teaching the children an old-fashioned country dance "Lavender Bunches," stepping gaily to the tune of her own whistling, and laughing as merrily as any, Jane could have begged her father's pardon on her knees. His magnanimity in never referring again to their conversation was esteemed by her almost as highly as by himself.

## CHAPTER IV.

THE yellow carriage swung heavily along the muddy roads. It was one of Sir Charles's grievances that Lady Maria had insisted upon the carriage for the wedding journey and scouted his suggestion of driving the bride in his curricule.

"After being married, you'll be in no fit state to take her over those Sussex roads."

Sir Charles muttered something about being able to carry his liquor like a gentleman.

"Liquor? who said anything about liquor? It was the raptures of love that I was thinking of—they fly to the steadiest head. It won't look well for you to break your wife's neck on the wedding day, even though you don't gain much by her death."

The one person of whom Sir Charles stood in awe was his grandmother, and he submitted sulkily, mentally scoring all the boredom of the journey against the wife who was forced upon him.

After the door was shut upon them, and they had driven away from Brunswick Square, Sir Charles had not embarrassed his wife by any attentions. He had made her my Lady, and d—— me, that was enough and more than enough for an attorney's

cousin; he had never promised to make love to her, and he was not going to begin now; it was tiring work getting married, and his head was going round with it. So he rolled himself round in one corner, and was soon asleep.

When he woke, streets and houses for some time had given place to country roads and green trees. The carriage was standing before an inn, and his man Markham was at the carriage door.

"Beg pardon, Sir Charles, but you told me to let you know when we came to the Jolly Farmer."

"Um—yes—I remember—they say there's deuced good ale——" Sir Charles emerged from the carriage and went into the bar.

When he came back, a few minutes later, he was in a better humour. The ale had proved equal to its reputation, and his head was not so uncomfortable as it had been. After all, it was something to have got away from those hot rooms and that crowd stinking of scents and essences, into the fresh air. Why, the girl was asleep too, in her corner—no wonder, after having to go through all that flummery.

"Will her ladyship choose anything?" It was the discreet voice of Sir Charles's man.

"No, she's asleep—pity to wake her," said Sir Charles, getting into the carriage more quietly than before. "Shut the door gently—don't bang it, you fool—and tell him to drive on."

Honor had moved in her sleep so that her face was turned towards him, and for the first time he scrutinised it attentively, feature by feature. Not pretty, he agreed with Lady Maria, but at the same time something might be made of her. The mouth was too large, the colouring too brown; but there were washes



and powders that women used for their skins which might give her something of the conventional red and white. The head was small—nearly buried in that ridiculous bonnet. Some people objected to red hair, but with a dash of powder it would look well enough, provided that the eyes were dark. They should be dark, to match the eyebrows; those curling eyelashes would make them look dark at any rate. She had her points, and her cousin said she was of a sweet disposition. Jane Rivers ought to know; women were generally keen to pick faults in each other.

Egad, she was a pretty creature, that girl, too good to be an attorney's daughter or Egerton's wife. It was devilish hard that the smug dull fellows like Egerton should have all the luck; he was going to marry a charming wife, and Lady Maria probably would leave him all her savings. Well, Egerton might have to wait many years before touching a penny; the old lady was as tough as a bag of nails, and would not part with a farthing while she lived. "She'd not leave it to anyone if she could help herself, but she knows it would melt if she took it with her," chuckled her undutiful grandson.

Cheered by his own wit, he thought once more of his bride. He had promised Jane Rivers to be kind to her, and he was a man of his word. She would be quite contented living in the country if he gave her a pony carriage, and he would take her up to Town sometimes to buy new clothes.

At this stage of his reflections Honor slowly opened her eyes and gazed up at him.

"So you're awake at last, my lady." Sir Charles bent over her with a hoarse laugh. "How do you feel? are you beginning to get over it? No, you need

not twist away—why, d—— me, child, you've not married an ogre! You couldn't look more scared if you saw Bony sitting beside you in the carriage instead of your lawful husband. Here, give me a kiss, and we'll be good friends."

Honor's dreams had carried her far away to the West Country, and in the first shock of waking she could not remember where she was. She saw a flushed face bending down to hers, she felt the reek of a hot breath upon her cheeks, and knew that a strong arm was penning her into the corner, and she struck at the face with both hands.

"——! you vixen!" swore Sir Charles, flinging himself down upon the seat. "I'll teach you a lesson!"

Honor made no answer, but she clenched her strong brown fingers till the white kid gloves split.

"I'll show you who is master when we get to Flamington Park. If you don't choose to be friends—have it the other way. If I've married a wild cat, I'll cut her claws before I'm much older."

He threw himself back in his corner and stared out of the window, thrusting his hands into his breeches pockets and humming a tune. The carriage laboured on over the roads, and Honor, upright and motionless, struggling with all her might against a sickening terror, kept her face turned from him.

It was true that the girl, who had scarcely spoken to a man with any claims to gentle birth until she came to London, was ignorant, as Jane Rivers said, of what marriage would mean for her. But if there was one fear that had been strongly impressed upon her, in her almost cloistral upbringing, it was that of a drunken husband. It was a fear that would not have been



understood in the society of her day, where it was so common for a gentleman to take more than he ought that it excited remark only when, like Mr Sheridan, he came very drunk among the ladies and made violent love to one or other of them. But in the Somerset village the wife of a drunken husband had more to bear than the inconvenience of driving home with him in the carriage after a dinner-party. Nurse Tanner's husband caused the death of her only child before he drank himself into his coffin. In the cottage near Miss Lester's lived a woman who had fallen into the fire when her husband knocked her down. As long as she could remember anything, Honor could remember that scarred, distorted face; the recollection of it came across her now, making her turn white and drive her nails into the palms of her hands. She had never fainted in her life, and did not know what the sick, crawling sensation meant; but whatever it might be, she was not going to let Sir Charles see her terror.

She need not have feared; for all his sins, her husband would never have used bodily violence to his wife. Though he would neglect her, spend her money—if he could get it,—ignore her, even swear at her, without a qualm of conscience, it would have been against his code to strike her. Nor was there any risk of other demonstrations. He had meant his advances for kindness, and was far too angry to repeat them.

But Honor, still tingling from the rough grip of his arm, and remembering the flushed sulky face and the glaring eyes, wondered how long it would be before she was knocked down. At least, there would be servants at Flamington Park; she would not have to stand over the fire cooking his dinner, like poor Molly Cuff that night when her husband came home. She

would be careful to keep away from the fireplace whenever Sir Charles was in the room.

At the thought of being alone in a strange house with him, a fresh wave of terror swept over her. If only she could have with her some woman that she knew! Even Dawson, the maid, would have been some protection, though Dawson made very evident her contempt for a mistress who had been brought up in the country. If Jane were there—or even Mrs Rivers, who was like nothing in the world so much as a plump and fussy Dorking hen, and had about as many ideas.

She could not bear it, she would not be left at his mercy, she must escape. No one would help her. Little as she knew of marriage, she understood all authorities, from Nurse Tanner to Mr Rivers, to pronounce that a wife was absolutely in the power of her husband. “Why didn’t you run away from him?” she asked once, when Nurse Tanner let fall something about her married life. “Reckon I’d have been brought back again,” answered the old woman, with a grim smile distending her toothless mouth. “The woman do belong to the man, my dear, when you’re lawfully married in church.”

As Honor’s memory returned to this point a sudden thought flashed into her mind, so that she started and almost cried out. Nurse Tanner was always insistent upon the form of being married in church. She was furious on discovering that Honor had made friends with a family of gipsies who camped every year in the hollow of the hill beyond the church. “Low, thieving varmint, that bring the smallpox, and the women married across the tongs.”

“How do they do that?” Honor had asked,

delighted with the notion. "I should like to see it."

"Reckon you'll do no such thing," was Nurse's stern reply. "Marriage be no marriage unless 'tis in church."

Mrs Rivers had not been successful in explaining the nature of a special licence to Honor; it is to be doubted whether the good lady had any clear notion of it herself, except that it was a necessity for persons of fashion. Honor knew no more than that she had not been married in church; therefore it could not have been a marriage. And on the top of this thought came another: she, at any rate, could not be married, for she had never "said the words." On coming into the room and seeing her bridegroom, sullen, scowling, red-faced, pushed forward by his best man, disgust and dismay had overpowered all other feelings. In a confusion of womanly revolt and childish ill-temper, she had made up her mind that she would not pledge herself to be his wife; when prompted by the clergyman, she murmured something inaudible. The clergyman had been warned by Mr Rivers that the bride was very shy; he was in a hurry to keep some other engagement, and annoyed at having lost much time waiting for the bridegroom. So he took no trouble to make Honor repeat the words after him, according to the rubric, and never knew that what she was saying to herself, over and over again, was, "I will not! I will not!"

No; it could not be a real marriage, and Honor's childish elementary conscience felt free to disregard it. She might escape from her bridegroom, if she could.

If she could — there lay the difficulty. How was

she to escape? And if she escaped, where should she go? A day earlier, she would have bent her mind to finding the way back to Witham, confident that Miss Lester and Nurse Tanner would hide their darling from all the powers of Church and State. In the reticule at her side, to-day, was the ill-folded, ill-written letter, the composition of the Parish Clerk, which was brought to her while she changed her bridal gown, to say that old Miss Lester had dropped down dead beside the bee-hives in her little garden, and that Nurse Tanner, feeble and broken, was to be taken to live with a nephew beyond Taunton, and was not expected to survive the removal. The nephew might not be willing to shelter Honor.

It would be useless to appeal to her guardian. Mr Rivers's smooth complacency might have been shaken had he known how accurately his selfishness and unscrupulousness were divined by the girl whom he thought little better than half-witted. Lady Maria's contempt and distrust for him were no greater than Honor's, though the girl could not express her feelings in words. Mrs Rivers—as well make butter out of skim-milk as expect any help from her. Jane, though not clever, was not a fool like her mother, and had shown herself the kindest of friends to a forlorn little cousin; but Jane would be afraid to run counter to her father. In all her world there was no one to save the poor little bride from the husband whom she dreaded unspeakably.



## CHAPTER V.

SIR CHARLES, with his face turned obstinately to the window, had been staring for some time at the hedges, and had whistled through most of his répertoire of tunes, when the carriage came to a sudden stop.

To thrust his head out and demand, with suitable oaths, what the coachman meant by it, and whether he intended to reach Flamington Park that night, was the natural thing to do; and he did it. Markham came to the door. Honor, shrinking back in her corner, heard more oaths, angry questions, abuse, and through it all Markham's precise utterance. Something had happened to one of the carriage wheels; the roads were very heavy—worse than any that coachman had ever driven upon; it must have rained here for days and nights. No, it would not be possible to go on; the wheel would not stand another ten minutes.

Sir Charles got out to look at the wheel, and was obliged to agree with the coachman. "What was to be done?" he demanded, after a hearty and comprehensive curse, in which he included every one with any part in that day's doings, from the carriage-maker to the Archbishop of Canterbury.



The coachman inserted the end of his whip beneath his wig and scratched his head, having no suggestions to make, or thinking it not worth while to make them. Markham, who, after several years' service with Sir Charles, was expert in finding expedients in a difficulty, had a proposal on his tongue. When they passed through a village, ten minutes ago, he had noticed a blacksmith's shop at the far end. There was sure to be some sort of an inn, where Sir Charles and My Lady might rest while the wheel was mended.

"I'll be bound you damaged the wheel yourself when we changed horses last, so as to have another chance of drinking at my charges. Find the inn, in the devil's name; and if you keep me waiting five minutes longer than you need, I'll break every one of your bones."

Markham came back, after an interval, with a report that an inn there was at the turn of the village street, and that it seemed a clean, respectable place, but that, unfortunately, some local society of Oddfellows had chosen to hold festival there that day, and were taking up the only parlour.

"Drive to the inn, then, and be quick about it. What do I want with a parlour?"

"My Lady——"

"They can find her a bedroom, and she can sit there. Make haste, —— it all, and don't stand there chattering. Do you want me to sleep upon the road?"

The carriage was turned in the narrow road with difficulty, and laboured, with jerks and strains, up the village street, and round a corner to the door of the inn, where a sign represented "The Good

Woman" as a petticoated figure without a head. Through the windows of parlour and bar came snatches of song, loud talk, and laughter. In the porch the landlady, a mountain of a woman, blocked the entry with her bulk, and seemed in no way disposed to receive more guests when she heard that these had no intention of stopping for the night. No, she had no place for the lady to sit. Some of the Oddfellows had come from a distance, and would sleep in the house; there was no bedroom vacant.

Honor, peeping timidly through the window, saw Sir Charles striding up and down, flicking his riding-boots with his cane, blustering and swearing, and bit her lips to keep down the dumb terror within her. The discreet Markham, meanwhile, had slipped past his master to the landlady's side, and was trying persuasion. Whatever he said or did, it was so far successful that the landlady suddenly called to remembrance a little bedroom at the top of the house; it belonged to her daughter, who was away from home, and if the lady chose to sit in it, she would send her up some refreshment.

Markham opened the carriage door, and Honor descended before Sir Charles, awakening to a tardy sense of duty, was there to hand her out.

"Well, you'll have some place to sit in, my lady, and you can tell the woman to bring you whatever you like—unless you would rather sit with me in the garden?"

It was meant for a joke, perhaps with a clumsy notion of atoning for his roughness, but the effect upon Honor was to make her gather her cloak about her and dart into the porch, out of reach of his hand.

Sir Charles laughed sulkily. "Have your own way,

madam. I've no more wish for your company than you have for mine."

Stepping back with an ironical bow, he stumbled and nearly fell over a white-headed boy of about seven years old, who had stolen up behind him, to gape at "the quality." There followed more oaths, and two or three smart cuts with the cane. Honor, trembling behind the landlady, saw and heard this much, and felt her terror harden into deadly loathing. She did not see, as she went upstairs, that Sir Charles, having relieved his feelings, demanded whether the boy were hurt, and tossed him a shilling, "to teach him to keep his eyes in the right place in future."

A bold-looking girl, with such a quantity of ribbons about her as showed that the Sussex smugglers did good business with France, took Lady Mendip to a tiny low room under the roof, and wanted to know whether Madam chose a glass of wine or a dish of tea.

Honor, who had tasted no wine and very little tea until she came to London, asked for a cup of milk. The girl tossed her head, and could not tell whether there was any milk in the house; she would go and ask downstairs. This promise was never fulfilled, for on going down she found enough to do in attending to Sir Charles. He was inclined to amuse himself with her after the fashion of gentlemen of his period, and by the time that he became too drunk for flirtation, she had forgotten about the lady upstairs.

Meanwhile Honor was alone in the little hot room, which reeked of apples and badly cured feathers.

There was no lock to the door; she pushed the only chair against it, threw off her bonnet and cloak, and lay down on the uncurtained bed to think over her action.

She would not and could not live with Sir Charles. If she could succeed in hiding herself for a few weeks, until Jane was married to Mr Egerton, it was possible that, in the event of her being discovered, they might protect her. Honor divined the mutual dislike of the cousins, which Mr Egerton strove to dignify in his case by calling it disapproval: what Jane's husband would not do for compassion or for generosity, he might do for spite.

She lay there, thinking, thinking, while the flies buzzed above her head, meeting in the centre of the low whitewashed ceiling, circling round each other as if they were taking part in some elaborate dance, and then breaking away to the corners of the room, to return again to the central point. The steady buzzing and the rhythmic movement wound her senses into a dream. Her eyelids closed, and, in spite of the closeness of the room and the odour of the feather-bed and the weight of her troubles, Honor once more fell asleep.

She woke in a few moments with a start and a stifled cry. Surely that face was glaring down again upon her. No, she was still alone, and the chair was before the door. What a fool she had been to waste in sleep any part of the time left her before the carriage came back.

She could not face the thought of being alone with Sir Charles at Flamington Park. She must escape before they reached the house. But how? She looked down on the white cloak, the plumed bonnet, the silk stockings and satin shoes, and realised it would be impossible to go far in such array. The staircase led down into the hall, from which both bar and parlour opened. Even if she could get out of the house



without being noticed, Sir Charles might be in the garden.

There was a little door behind the bed, and she opened it, in a desperate hope of finding some other way out.

Obviously it was the door of a garret, a lumber-room, where the landlady or her daughter stowed various possessions not in daily use. Overhead were the bare rafters. On the floor was a litter of boxes, rags, brooms, and other lumber, which Honor could not discern clearly. By this time it was growing dusk, and the only light came through the door, from a tiny window in the bedroom; the garret window had been stuffed up with a bundle of rags to avoid the tax. There was no other door to the garret. She could not play hide-and-seek among the rubbish. Here ended, then, her last hope of escape before reaching Flamington Park.

She was about to shut the door and turn away, when a white figure in the corner made her heart leap with fear. One of Nurse's most appalling stories had been of a beautiful Miss Basset, who hanged herself in a garret after she lost all her looks in the small-pox. Next moment Honor was scolding herself for being frightened at an old sheet thrown over a peg. She never knew why she took the trouble to lift the sheet in order to see what was beneath it.

There, on the peg, hung a woollen petticoat, the coarse cotton garment called a "bedgown," to be worn over it, and a coarse homespun handkerchief. It was the working dress of a country girl—such a dress as Honor herself used to wear when milking or butter-making. As she stared at it she seemed to hear the old farmer's words, often repeated, when she spent a morning in his wife's dairy—



"Eh, missy, but it's a pity you were born a lady, surely. You've a cool hand and a quick—you'd make a rare fine dairywoman."

Next moment she had torn off the embroidered silk gown, the *chef-d'œuvre* of her dressmaker, which was to figure in every account of the wedding given in next day's papers, rolled it up tightly, and thrust it under the heap of rubbish. As she made a place for it, she discovered a pair of thick shoes, with some wear still left in them—too large, but she could put something to fill the toes. She carried her spoil into the bedroom, and had a further piece of luck in discovering a pair of stout woollen stockings in the chest of drawers, which was the only piece of furniture except the chair and the bed.

In this disguise she might slip out of the house and perhaps make her way to some farm where they wanted a dairywoman. The petticoat was put on—too large, like the shoes, but its strings would prevent it from falling off. Over it went the bedgown; Honor was just pulling its tail through the pocket-holes, in the approved style, when a pair of creaking shoes came up the stairs, and a sharp rap fell upon the door.

"The carriage is waiting, my lady."

There had been just time for Honor to huddle the cloak about her, and to push the thick shoes and stockings under the bed.

The maid, in a hurry to return to more congenial work at the bar, noticed nothing, and flounced downstairs again as soon as her unwilling offer of help had been refused. Honor tied on the big bonnet, and having rolled shoes and stockings in the coarse handkerchief, carried them down, under her cloak.

The carriage was waiting, but Sir Charles was not

there to hand her into it; Markham seemed to have difficulty in finding the handle of the door. She sat in her corner for some minutes before Sir Charles reeled out of the bar, muttering something about it being hard that a fellow could not be left in peace on his wedding-day. He took no notice of Honor, but put up his legs on the opposite seat, and was snoring before they were a mile out of the village.

Honor waited, her hands clenched over the little bundle beneath her cloak. Come what might, she would break free from him. She knew not how to do it, but she had noticed that the coachman on the box had hat and wig awry, and his head drooping over the reins, and that Markham walked unsteadily. They would probably fall asleep like their master, and she might elude them, or they might upset the carriage and kill herself or Sir Charles. In one way or the other there was still a chance for her.

The road began to wind up a steep hill, and the horses dropped into a walk. Getting no touch of the whip to hurry them, they went more slowly still.

On the one side of the road was a quickset hedge and beyond it, a copse. Looking out of the window Honor saw a gap in the hedge, half-way up the hill.

Bonnet and cloak were dropped noiselessly upon the seat, the door-handle turned without a sound, and Honor was on the carriage step.

A rush of cool air blowing upon him made Sir Charles shift his position uneasily, and grunt, "What are you about, Markham, you fool?" without opening his eyes. There was no answer, the door shut with a little click, the draught ceased, and Sir Charles dropped back into sleep.

Behind the quickset hedge, under the shadow of a

great elm-tree, to whose trunk was nailed a board with the warning, "Beware of mantraps and spring-guns," among the yellow stems of bracken and the dull green shoots of dog-mercury, a girl crouched, trembling.

At that moment, in Brunswick Square, the apothecary had just pronounced Dawson to be sickening with measles. Had the maid developed the complaint a little earlier, her mistress might have caught it from her, and the wedding must have been postponed. Mr Rivers felt justified in his belief that an overruling Providence approved his virtuous life, whatever Lady Maria might say, and gave it thanks after his fashion.

## CHAPTER VI.

THE yellow coach had disappeared over the top of the hill for some time before Honor ventured to creep from under the bracken and peer through the gap in the hedge. Up and down the road there was nothing to be seen ; not a sound came on the still evening air, save the persistent lowing of a cow that had lost her calf, from the field opposite to the wood.

A gleam of gold shot over the ragged edges of the black clouds piled in the west. "More rain coming," thought Honor ; "I must make haste to find shelter."

She stripped off satin slippers and silk stockings, breaking the stitches that had been run into them in the morning, after they were on her feet, to make them sit more closely. Then she tore pieces from the stockings to fill up the toes of the shoes carried away from the inn, which threatened to drop off at every step. Under the bracken she dug a hole in which to bury the slippers, and the reticule which hung upon her arm. The gold-topped smelling-bottle and gold-bound pocket-book could not belong rightfully to a dairy-woman. In the white silk purse with gold tassels was the first instalment of her pin-money, solemnly handed to her, that morning, by Mr Rivers—fifteen guineas

and some loose silver, which she hid in her stays. She would fain have kept the purse, as a remembrance of Jane, who netted it, but if it were seen it would be sure to cause trouble, so she laid it tenderly in the ground. On the top of all she flung the gold ring from her left hand, and then put back the earth, stamping hard upon it as if each stroke of her foot killed some evil thing.

The last yellow gleam was fading out of the west when the little figure stole through the gap and began to walk down the hill. She was all alone, in a strange country, with no more than the clothes on her back and the guineas hidden in her stays; she knew not where she should spend the night, or how she should find her next meal, and she was overflowingly happy. She had escaped from Mr Rivers, with his snuff-box and his bunch of seals, from Mrs Rivers, with her knitting bag and her fan, from Sir Charles, with his cane and his shirt-frill, and she was going into the wide world to seek her fortune, like the princess in a fairy tale.

But for her big shoes, Honor would have danced along the road. Even when she began to remember that she had eaten nothing since an early hour that morning, having had no appetite after her wedding, her spirits did not fail her. There were blackberries in the hedge, large and juicy, and there were clusters of nuts hanging not too high to be pulled down if she climbed the bank. So she walked on, filling her hands and eating as she went. Bats skimmed over her head, huge cockchafers boomed into her face. A watery moon rode in the sky, not yet covered by the storm-clouds. The air was heavy with the scent of honey-suckle. Honor pulled a spray from the hedge and thrust it into her handkerchief.

She came to a place where the road forked. It was



too dark to read the inscription on a battered signpost, and she took the turning to the right because the other seemed to be the highroad. Before long the way was closed by a gate; beyond, Honor could see a low dark building, evidently a farm. She would go there and ask whether the farmer's wife wanted a dairywoman; perhaps they would give her a lodging for the night; if not, she would ask them to sell her food, and there were outhouses and barns into one of which she might creep for a few hours, and be off and away before any one was up in the morning.

She was feeling for the latch of the gate in the darkness, when a dog in the farmyard began to bark violently. The door of the farmhouse opened, and a huge figure strode towards her, swinging a lantern.

"Hold your noise, Nelson! Who's there? Is it the maid from Mrs Cope?"

"I don't know where I am—I lost my way in the dark." Honor could see nothing but a great black outline, and did not venture to declare herself.

"You're at Ringletts farm, right enough. I'm Mr Lapworth. Mrs Cope, she promised to send some one if she could. I did not know if you would get here to-night—it's a good step. I would have gone on the road to meet you, but the mistress was terrible uneasy, and I could not leave her."

The voice was very deep, and at the same time curiously soft, the utterance so clear that Honor had no difficulty in understanding him, in spite of the Sussex drawl. As he spoke, he unfastened the gate, and she passed inside it, with an instinct that there was no danger.

"Did Mrs Cope tell you what was wanted?" the deep voice asked, as they crossed the farmyard.

"No," said Honor truthfully.

"She promised me she would—but you'll see for yourself now. Here be the maid from Mrs Cope's, mother; now you'll be comfortable."

He led her through a flagged porch into a large kitchen with a stone floor, and great beams overhead from which hung fitches of bacon, bunches of herbs, and other things whose nature was not apparent at the first glance by the light of the fire. On the table were the remains of a meal, half cleared away. The room was clean, but looked as if an unpractised hand had been at work in it; plates, dishes, cooking utensils were set in unexpected places. A settle was drawn close to the fire, and on it, propped with pillows, sat a woman.

Once she had been stout and sturdy, now she was so wasted by illness as to look smaller than Honor. Her face, shrunken and wrinkled, was yellow as wax; from under the close frilled cap fell elf-locks of grizzled hair, nearly hiding the sunken black eyes. The thin yellow fingers wound and unwound a ball of yarn.

"Here she be, mother," said Mr Lapworth, gently pushing Honor towards the settle; "she's had a long way to come in the dark."

The restless fingers still continued their play, but the black eyes stared up at Honor, and something seemed to pass over the death-like face, as a breeze passes over a stagnant pool. She stretched out one hand, and pulled the girl down beside her.

"That's right! she's taken to you!" cried the farmer, delighted. "She can't speak to you—she's not spoken for ten years—but she wants you to stay with her. I never saw her do that for Susan."

"Is she your mother?" Honor was sitting close to

the old woman, and the yellow fingers had dropped the ball and were playing with the honeysuckle in the girl's kerchief.

"My mother? No, my wife, and when we went to church, thirty years ago, she was as pretty a maid as ever came to be married there." The farmer's great hand stroked the wrinkled cheeks. "Aye, you were a pretty maid—parson, he said so."

For the first time, Honor looked at the farmer. To anybody who had read of the Vikings, it would have seemed that one of them was standing in the red glow of the fire. The unlettered girl knew only that here was the tallest and biggest man she had ever seen. His head, covered with thick fair hair with a ripple in it as of a sea wave, nearly touched the rafters; a long fair beard fell half-way down his great chest. His large blue-grey eyes looked down at his wife, with the half sorrowful and all tender look of a mother on a sick child.

"There's the shepherd's wife—she comes in every day to do the cooking, but she can't stay no longer, and the mistress can't be left without some one to be with her when the lads and I are at work. Susan—that's my niece—she lived here, and was company to her, and looked after the dairy, but yesterday she hears that her father tumbled off the corn rick and broke his thigh, and they say he'll not be walkin' again till the winter be come. So she set off to go back to Arundel, as soon as 'twas light, this morning, and she'll not be comin' back here till Christmas."

"Then you want me to—to wait upon Mrs Lapworth?" Honor felt like the wanderer in a dream who suddenly finds himself at home in the most unfamiliar places.

"Just so. I met Mrs Cope in the road yesterday, and she said she was going into the hiring fair to find a servant for herself, and she promised to find one for us, if she could. But I've never asked you if you have a mouth, and you must be mortal tired after your walk. Draw up your chair to the table, and have your supper."

Honor was thankful enough to obey, for nuts and blackberries had done little to appease a very healthy appetite. There was cold bacon, a coarse brown loaf, and a piece of cheese on the table, and as she ate, she wondered what Mrs Rivers would have said to see her—Mrs Rivers, who thought that a young lady should have little more substantial than tea and toast.

"There's skim-milk in the jug; maybe you'd rather drink water. I asked Mrs Cope to tell you you'll get no ale. I'll have no strong drink in my house, like my father before me."

A huge black cat, who had been asleep in front of the fire, on a rug made of scraps of bright-coloured rags, woke with an instinct that there was food to be had for the asking, stretched himself with claws fixed in the rug, and then rubbed his back against Honor's chair. For the sake of a scrap from her plate, he was good enough to allow her to stroke his sleek head.

"You're fond of animals?" the farmer asked, watching her from the settle beside his wife. "So is the mistress. She used to tame the birds out of the wood—she'd have the house full of them in a cold winter. Once she had a badger that the boys dug out of the hill—a swarthy beast, he was. What do they call you?"

Honor stared, puzzled.

"You have got a name, surely?"



"My name!" Honor had never thought of this, and, taken by surprise, could not think of anything but "Lester—Honor Lester."

"'Tis not a name in these parts. Where's your native?"

"I have no home," said Honor, guessing at his meaning. "I used to live—far away from here, but all my friends are dead, and my cousins did not want me."

The farmer was about to ask another question, when his wife slowly and painfully began to rise from the settle. Helping herself by his shoulder and a chair, she dragged herself to Honor, and put one arm round the girl, looking round at her husband. His face was beautiful to see in its pride and tenderness.

"There now! she's been listenin' all the while, and she's understood. She was living with an uncle when I met her first, and he made her none too welcome. She was thinkin' of going out to service, but she married me instead, just to get away from him—that was the way of it, wasn't it, mother? Don't you fear now, my dear; if you've taken to her, and she be a good maid, I'll not turn her out—not if she breaks the Toby mug."

The invalid dropped down again upon the settle and lay back on her pillows with half-closed eyes.

"She's wantin' to go to sleep—mortial tired she be, what wi' one thing and what wi' the other. You'll be ready to go to bed too, for you'll have to be up early to-morrow. Where's your bundle?"

Honor looked blank.

"Your clothes, I mean. Did you leave them to come out by the carrier? He'll not be here till next Monday. Well, you'll find some old things that Susan left to be given away in the room above."



"Can I help her to bed?" asked Honor.

"No, she'll let none help her but me. There's a rushlight for you. It's the door at the top of the staircase. Good-night to you, my maid. You'll find the bed comfer'ble—the mistress stuffed it herself, afore she was taken ill."

## CHAPTER VII.

SIR CHARLES was still sound asleep in his corner when a sudden jerk broke upon his dream of skimming over the Channel on his brown mare, to ride a race against Bonaparte, with Lady Maria and Mr Rivers to hold the stakes. Too sleepy to swear, he stretched out his legs and pulled his coat round him; it was chilly, and his bedroom door must have burst open, there was such an infernal draught. Where was that idiot Markham? What did the fellow mean by not seeing that the door was properly fastened. He must have made a night of it; what had Markham been about, to let him go to bed in his coat and boots? Well, he supposed it was time to get dressed, if he was going to be married that morning.

"Markham! Markham! Curse the fool! where is he?"

"I beg pardon, Sir Charles," came Markham's voice at his elbow, discreet as ever, if the tones were a little thick, "but Lady Elystan particularly desires to speak to you."

The name roused Sir Charles as few other sounds would have had the power to do. He opened his eyes and stared out into the darkness.

At first he could see nothing; all round was the night, soft, still, laden with the scent of flowers in hedge and meadow, and the moon was hidden. Gradually, as his wits began to come back to him and his eyes to grow accustomed to the gloom, he made out that the carriage was at a standstill in the middle of a lane, and that Markham, himself three parts asleep, was holding the door open.

"What do you mean? where are we?" he demanded, pulling himself up; "this isn't Flamington Park, you fool."

There was a burst of laughter from a corner of the lane close by, where a clump of beech-trees cast a deep shade. No woman but one in the whole earth could laugh that laugh; Sir Charles was out of the carriage in a moment, narrowly escaping a fall in the mud, while Markham rubbed his eyes with one hand and shut the door with the other.

"You here, my lady?"

"At your service, sir." The voice was clear and ringing, but without the mellow sound which might have been expected from such a laugh.

"It's too late for you to be out riding," muttered Sir Charles, as yet only half awake. "It's not safe——"

"Why not? I have a groom with me to protect me from footpads, and drunken sailors, and gentlemen of fashion like yourself, and I know my way, which is more than your people did."

By this time Sir Charles was standing under the beech-trees by the horse's head; the groom pulled back to give him more room, and the lady's horse began to dance upon three legs.

"Steady, steady, Selim! Don't come too near him; he can't bear strangers."

"Since when have I been a stranger?" demanded Sir Charles.

Lady Elystan made a pretence of combing out Selim's mane with the handle of her whip before answering.

"Since—your marriage——"

"What difference does that make?" Sir Charles dropped his voice more from instinct than from any fear of being overheard; if he had been sufficiently clear-headed to remember appearances, Selim's antics were keeping the groom beyond earshot. Lady Elystan, whose seat showed how she came by her nickname of "La Belle Amazone," stirring up the horse to a fresh display rather than making any attempt to check him, answered coolly—

"Difference? Last week you were dashing along the roads in a curriele or going across country on Sabina; this evening you are lumbering along in a ponderous old coach, fit for your grandmother, like some octogenarian dowager out for her afternoon airing with the maid and the pug-dog, the coachman asleep on the box and you asleep inside—your man just sufficiently awake to bawl to my groom to ask him the way to Flamington Park."

"I'll teach them to go to sleep another time," vowed Sir Charles, making play with his cane.

"Be quiet, pray, you're frightening my poor Selim. Do you want to see me thrown?"

"The horse has got to be foaled that would throw you, my lady."

"*Merci bien!* but I want none of your compliments; keep them for Lady Mendip. Is she asleep too?"

The bridegroom made no answer except to say something under his breath, at which Lady Elystan burst

into another peal of laughter. Knowing that her admirers were right when they likened her laugh to a chime of golden bells, she did not stifle it by too frequent use, and like everything else she did, it was intended to produce a calculated effect.

"Oh, fie! you must reform your evil ways now that you are married. Go to bed sober, never gamble and swear, rise at five in the morning and go out with your bride to watch the young lambkins frisking in the meadows."

"I don't know where we should look for young lambkins in September, my lady."

"*Touchée! touchée!*" cried Lady Elystan, throwing out her hand with a mocking little bow. "That was a fair hit, sir; now, as you have had the better of me, be magnanimous and let me go on."

"I was not fencing with you," said Sir Charles doggedly. "It's too late at night to be standing here talking nonsense. What I want to know is, what are you doing here?"

"I might ask the same of you, sir. Why are you not at Flamington Park by this time, and your bride safely tucked up in the four-post bed with the hangings that Queen Elizabeth embroidered, instead of wandering about the lanes at least two miles off your right road?"

"Because of that accursed wheel," grumbled Sir Charles; "we had to stop for over an hour while it was being mended, in some d——d alehouse, with the bumpkins clattering their mugs and singing at the top of their voices, most confoundedly out of tune."

"Poor man! but you should have chosen your conveyance better. You can't expect your grandmother's



coach to stand these Sussex roads. Good-night; you must be in haste to get home, and as for your poor bride, she must be wondering whether you have eloped already. When you have turned the coach—if your coachman can do it without upsetting you into the ditch—take the second turn to your left, and that will bring you back to the highroad. Follow it till you get into Pulborough; going down the hill past the church will probably wake you up sufficiently to ask the way on to Flamington Park.”

“And where are you going?”

“I? home, to be sure, like a dutiful wife. My lord had such a sad fit of gout this morning that he could do nothing but roar, and if I played the harp or sang, went from one room to another, or sat at my embroidery, it was all the same—it made him worse whatever I did. Even the sight of me stringing my bow on the lawn caused him such excruciating agonies that I was forced to throw down bow, arrows, gauntlet, and all, and take shelter in the arbour for fear that his oaths would bring the house down. But the arbour was full of frogs which had come in from the garden, which is like a swamp after all this rain. If I had stayed there another five minutes, I should have begun to croak too. So as there was no place for me in the house, I rode off on Selim, thinking that if I could find some one to take a hand at cards this evening it would do my lord good to have some one else to swear at.” Sir Charles again muttered something to which she paid no heed. “But I scoured the country in vain—not a soul to be had who could say on his oath that he knew the ace of spades from the queen of diamonds. Even our own rector won’t leave his own fireside and his fat wife, though I vowed upon my honour that we would play

nothing more exciting than whist if he came, and he should have every penny I won to buy a box where his cat may kitten, as my housekeeper complains of her using our pew on these occasions. So I am going home, having had all my trouble for nothing, to sit up till morning playing picquet or double dummy with my lord. When he has one of these bouts, he will never go to bed before daylight. What are you doing, Sir Charles? There lies your way."

"My way lies with you; I shall escort you home——"

"Nonsense! I am close to my own gates, and the groom is quite sober, which perhaps is more than can be said of you."

"And then I am coming in to play with Lord Elystan, if you and he will excuse my dress."

"On your wedding night? You must be crazy, Sir Charles! Lady Mendip will never allow it."

"Markham!" shouted Sir Charles, turning back to the coach, "take Lady Mendip on to Flamington Park, and see that she is properly attended to when you get there. I shall not come till to-morrow. No stopping to drink by the way, mind, or I'll make you both sorry for it."

He swung round on his heel and came back to Lady Elystan, who had brought Selim out from the shade of the beech-trees, and was in the middle of the road. The moon which struggled from behind the clouds shone full upon her oval face and perfect figure as she waited, smiling and scornful.

Sir Charles's look showed that he could be another man than the sot from whom Honor had fled.

"Sir Charles, how absurd you are! Do climb into the family coach and go home with your bride—she'll need to hold your hand when you go down Pul-

borough hill." Lady Elystan turned her horse and began walking him slowly along the road. "You can't leave her alone on your wedding night."

"I can't leave you alone to be sworn at by Lord Elystan."

"He is my husband," she said, with a pathetic droop of her head, "and, after all, I am used to it—and he always cries and begs my pardon when the fit goes off."

"He shall have no need to beg your pardon to-night. If he wants to swear, he shall swear at me."

For some moments there was no sound but the click of Selim's hoofs as he paced along the road, with Sir Charles walking beside him and patting his neck. Sir Charles was never a man of many words; if he had anything to say, he said it; if not, he kept silence. He could not abide women who pestered you to talk; he would have been content to walk on at Lady Elystan's side, all through the night, looking up at her. She seemed deep in thought, gazing straight before her. The groom kept at such a convenient distance in the rear that it felt as if they were alone together.

When at last she spoke, it was carelessly, almost indifferently, without looking at him—

"Selim does not read the fashionable intelligence, so he does not know that he must look on you as a stranger from to-day. He much prefers you to the last gentleman who was walking beside me this afternoon."

"Who was he?"

"Oh, you need not bristle up and lay back your ears! It was quite proper, sir, seeing that the groom was just behind me, and it was some one of whom your grandmother thinks highly. I have often heard her say that he is the only man in London who can bow like a

gentleman. I wonder she has not sent you to take lessons of him."

"Who was he?" repeated Sir Charles.

"What impertinent curiosity! what is it to you how many *beaux* I choose to have? You should not grudge me a little amusement when I am *en province*."

"Who was he?"

"You'll set Selim off again if you touch my reins. Well, if you must know, it was that queer misanthropic cousin of mine, Claud Fenwick."

"Is he staying with you?"

"Not he! I tell you, he is a complete misanthrope; he sleeps all day, and goes wandering about, star-gazing, all night."

"I thought he had been hanged or shot—caught corresponding with the French, or something of the kind."

"How absurd! Just because old Mr Harbord is in his dotage and ready to believe anything that his wife tells him, every one must needs believe it too. Fenwick is no more a traitor than you are—though, I admit, he has the wits for it, if he chose, which is more than could be said for most of the people who talk about him."

"But didn't he get Bony to clap his cousin into prison?"

"Nothing of the sort. I will tell you the story from the beginning, so that you may be able to contradict all these geese. *À propos*, did you know that it is really dangerous to say 'Bo!' to a goose, or at any rate to a gander? I met one near the lodge yesterday, and it flew at me when I tried to drive it away. Luckily I had my riding-whip in my hand, and could defend myself till the woman from the lodge came up,



otherwise, I believe it would have forced me to retreat—not the first gander that has been too many for me. My lord was furious, for fear the gander should have been injured in the fray ; it was a most valuable bird, and he must needs have it brought up into the hall that he might hobble out in dressing-gown and slippers to make sure that it was none the worse.”

A very ugly word flew from Sir Charles’s lips.

“What is the matter ? Did one of these huge beetles fly into your eye ? If so, you have my sympathy ; the country might be endurable if it were not for the insects—and the natives. But try to control your feelings when the next comes bump into your face, as if I hear such coarse expressions again, I shall be obliged to spur Selim and ride away, leaving you to find your way back to your bride, supperless, in the dark.”

“You know it was not a beetle !” he burst out savagely. “You know that I can’t endure to see you——”

“You promised me not to talk in that way.”

Sir Charles hung his head, like a repentant school-boy.

“Which of my friends can I trust, if you fail to keep your word ?”

“Beg pardon — y’ know I never meant to annoy you,” he muttered.

“Well, we’ll talk no more about ganders, as it seems to excite you ; I will tell you Fenwick’s story. You have heard of old Mr Harbord, who is my first cousin at least three times removed. He is very wealthy and very old and has no children, so for the last thirty years all his cousins—he has no nearer kin—have been toadying him, in the hope of being remembered. The only one who has held aloof is



myself. When first we married, my lord wanted me to invite the Harbords to stay with us, but I said I would not, and that's poz! it was no use to bore myself to death for the chance of getting some of their money, when every one knew that the two old quizzes spent all their time coddling themselves, and that I might break my neck across country any day, in which case I should have been bored for nothing. My lord persisted, till I had to tell him that if they came to the house I should go away. He had no mind to be left alone with Mrs Harbord, who is a Methodist, and would have read prayers three times a day, and catechised the servants while dinner was spoiling; so I heard no more of them, except that she sends me a tract whenever she sees my name in the 'Morning Post.'"

"What do you do with the tracts? Curl your hair with 'em?" asked Sir Charles, staring at the thick coils. "There's a leaf from a beech-tree tangled in it, just at the nape of your neck."

"That's a sign of sorrow, so the old housekeeper told me, when I came in from the lime walk this morning, with my head all over dead leaves. No, I give the tracts to my lord, who loves to make spills in the winter evenings. Don't you know that my hair curls of itself?"

"You promised me a lock of it once."

"Before you were married. Now you must wear one of Lady Mendip's red curls over your heart—What, you can't bear to hear me talk of her, either? You're hard to please to-night."

"Why can't you leave her alone?"

The golden laugh rang out once more. "If you are

so angry I shall be afraid to say another word. Why, it is beginning to rain; that may cool you down, and I'll tell you more about Claud Fenwick, if you will graciously permit it."

There was a mollified grunt from Sir Charles.

"Fenwick is no more of a toady than I, but old Harbord had taken a violent fancy to him when he was a boy, and took more notice of him than Claud's own father did. Claud's father, you must know, fell in love with a French lady and insisted on marrying her. She came of a good family; nearly all were put to death by the Jacobins. At least she escaped the guillotine by being married in England, but they say it was not a happy marriage. She died when Claud was a boy, and his father cared for nothing after her death, so Claud was left to himself or to old Harbord. Mrs Harbord was sure that he was bound to eternal perdition, being half French, and suspected of being a Papist."

"Papists and Frenchies—d——d bad cattle!" murmured Sir Charles, feeling it his duty to make some remark. "I remember Fenwick, a black-visaged fellow, who jabbered French like one of the frog-eaters, and no one ever saw him the worse for liquor. He could fence well—I'll say that for him."

"His cousin is much obliged to you, sir, for your testimony. Besides his other accomplishments, he is an astronomer. Old Harbord has some turn himself for science, and he and Fenwick would be scratching cabalistic signs on bits of paper, and concocting evil-smelling messes, quite content, in spite of Madam. But one day the old woman's dog lapped up one of their

brews, and that was the ruin of Master Claud. Are you attending to me?"

"I was wondering what that was in the ditch." Sir Charles bent down and plucked a handful of meadow-sweet. "Smells good, doesn't it? Better than all the stench that the London ladies sprinkle over their clothes."

Lady Elystan's fine nostrils curled disdainfully. "If you prefer rooting weeds out of the ditch to my conversation——"

"I don't. I've listened to all you told me," protested Sir Charles, flinging away the meadow-sweet. "I thought you would like the stuff to smell at."

"Thanks; you shall have a bouquet of rue and tansy from the kitchen garden in return."

"What about Fenwick?" asked Sir Charles. "How did poisoning the old woman's lap-dog get him into trouble?"

"What, you really were listening? As you elegantly put it, he can jabber French, which is suspicious, and he is in correspondence with various *savants* on the Continent—two facts which are enough to damn any man in these days. His cousin, John Champneys, a real stolid Briton, was engaged to Miss Charlotte Winslow. You know the minx? Pink lips, red coral necklace, black ringlets, and a simper——"

Sir Charles nodded.

"The parents thought her too young to marry at once, so Champneys, instead of staying at home and saving up his money to provide for the baker's dozen of daughters that such a goose would have been certain to bless him with, rushed over to the Continent with a party of friends. While they were at Rouen, the First

Consul declared war with England, and arrested all the English that he could lay his hands upon. Some of the party managed to escape by boat ; Champneys was arrested half a day before any one else. He had carried a packet from Fenwick to a correspondent at Rouen—some smoke-dried astronomer or spectacled botanist, no doubt. The Harbord woman would have it that Fenwick was in correspondence with the French Government, and contrived Champneys's arrest out of jealousy."

"It was a dirty trick," remarked Sir Charles sagely, "but you never can tell what these half-foreigners will do."

Lady Elystan's movement of impatience made Selim start half across the road.

"Steady there ! where are you going ?"

"If he did knock you into the ditch it would serve you right. Claud Fenwick is incapable of playing such a trick."

"They say all's fair in love."

"But he was never for an instant in love with Charlotte. The girl is one of those misses who think that every man is in love with them, and that only their chaste severity keeps them from being run away with, twice a week. She was quite ready to back the old woman up, and depose that Fenwick had been one of her *soupirants*. Now Claud has two natures within him, English and French ; sometimes one comes uppermost, sometimes the other, but it is always the wrong side for the moment. When old Harbord appealed to him to answer for himself, the Englishman happened to be on top, and, instead of protesting, he would only stand rigid as a poker and bow to all that was said,



and then tell them, in his coolest manner, 'If that is what you believe of me, sir, your house is no longer the place for me'—and with that out he walked."

"What else could a man do?"

"Do? why, make speeches about his honour, and appeals to friendship, vow that he was incapable of grieving his benefactor—in short, turn the French side, which was what Mr Harbord wanted. Not content with this *bêtise*, when he found his friends and acquaintances were looking coldly on him, and whispering to each other that there must be some grave reason for Mr Harbord to give him the cut, instead of facing it and living it down, he went off in the sulks and planted himself in a house about four miles from here. It was only by chance that I met him this evening, striding across the common, and I had to ride after him before I could make him stop. He will see none of his old friends, and he will make no new ones. He has no neighbours near him, except a convent of some of those nuns that escaped from France at the time of the Revolution and have never gone back again."

"I wonder at his taste," was Sir Charles's comment, "the youngest of them must be a bit long in the tooth by this time."

Lady Elystan pulled up Selim before a pair of gates in wrought iron, surmounted with an E and a Viscount's coronet. "Here is the lodge. Good-night."

"I am coming to the house with you——"

"You had better borrow the cob and ride after the coach. You can make your peace with your bride by telling her that you were engaged in a work of mercy, holding a decrepit old woman on her horse."

"I am coming with you." When Sir Charles's lower



lip was thrust out at that angle, even Lady Maria recognised the impossibility of altering his purpose.

"Have your way, then, but don't say that I invited you. And please to remember that if you don't know a good man when you see him, owing to the company you keep, Fenwick is one."

## CHAPTER VIII.

EXCEPT for the pleasure of being where he ought not, and staying away from where he should have been, Sir Charles gained nothing by spending the night at Elystan House. There was no excitement in sitting in a room from which every breath of air had been shut out for the last month, playing dummy whist for penny points. Only two candles—and those carefully screened—were allowed in the room, on account of the inflammation in Lord Elystan's eyes; the play was of the slowest, on account of the gout in Lord Elystan's hands, which made it almost impossible for him to pick up the cards or to hold them. When tired of staring at his own cards by the dim light, Sir Charles had not the consolation of gazing at Lady Elystan: she sat close beside him a little way back from the table, so that he could not look at her without turning round. She scarcely spoke, for Lord Elystan would not allow any conversation during the game; her face was indifferent and smiling; she seemed in no way irritated by the trifles which fretted Sir Charles to the last verge of endurance—her husband's incessant clearing of his throat, his

long hesitation over the choice of a card, his fault-finding whether she won or lost a trick.

At one time Lord Elystan had been something of a *viveur*, something of a scholar, and something of a traveller. With lost health, he had lost also his interest in everything that did not concern his maladies. He was so busy in impressing upon Lady Elystan that, by leaving the hall door open when she went out in the morning, she had caused a draught through the house which might have given him a chill and counteracted the effects of the medicine he was taking, that he quite forgot to wonder why Sir Charles was spending his wedding night at Elystan House.

They played on till the candles flared in their sockets, and a grey haggard light trickled through the cracks of the shutters. Then Lord Elystan considered that he might be able to sleep if they would leave him at once, and not stand there talking and laughing.

There was little temptation to laugh or to linger in the same room with Lord Elystan. His wife disappeared through one doorway as a very sleepy manservant entered by another to take Sir Charles to his bedroom.

Tired as he was, the guest could not sleep. He tossed and tumbled, and rolled from one side of the bed to the other. There was something wrong, he felt drowsily, though he could not tell what it was.

The sun roused him, and with a growl he dressed himself and came downstairs. He must go on to Flamington Park, he supposed. Plague take it! the servants were sure to be all agape, wondering why he had not come home with his bride. Some one would be

sure to tell his grandmother, and the old lady was quite capable of coming down to Flamington Park to bully him. What a cursed nuisance women were when they grew old! If that fellow Pitt wanted to raise more money for the war, why didn't he put a tax on every woman over forty? He almost wished he had gone to Flamington Park last night, seeing how little he had gained by stopping at Elystan House.

No, he did not wish anything of the kind. Through the open door he could see Lady Elystan on the lawn, and anything was worth while to see a woman look as she did of a morning.

He would be ready to lay any sum that nowhere would you find another woman who, after riding about the country till after dark, and playing whist with Lord Elystan till dawn, would show no sign of weariness. In her linen gown, the sun beating fiercely upon her uncovered chestnut hair, she was as triumphantly and supremely beautiful as when he saw her for the first time, in hoops and feathers and jewels, going to Court on the Birthday.

Who was that old fellow who had come up to speak to her? He seemed to have a monstrous long story to tell. What was it all about? She had started, and her face had turned pale. Was the old scoundrel annoying her? If so, he should be taught a lesson. Sir Charles was just about to hurl himself out of the door upon the culprit, when Lady Elystan, with a sudden gesture of dismissal, waved the man to one side and swept up the steps into the hall, shutting the door quickly.

"I forgot his Lordship's chill," said Sir Charles, coming forward. He would have said more, but the words died away at the look on her face.

"Stand back! keep back!" she gasped under her breath. "No, it is too late; the servants know it—every one will know it before nightfall."

"What is the matter?" He wondered if his beautiful lady, who was always doing unaccountable things, could be play-acting to amuse herself and startle him.

Surely no fear on earth could make her shiver and tremble as she was doing now.

"That was the man from the lodge," she answered, her breath coming in little short gasps as if she had been running hard. He came to tell me that there has been a fearful accident. Every one thinks you are killed. Your carriage was overturned into the river last night."

"How did it happen?" was all Sir Charles said.

"Your coachman must have been drunk. He went full tilt down the Pulborough hill. It was dark, and by that time the rain was coming down fast. The parapet of the bridge was broken by a heavy waggon last week, and it has never been mended. The horses slipped against it, and went crash into the river."

Sir Charles twisted a button on his waistcoat without looking up. There was silence, while the clock in the hall ticked heavily.

"A farm lad was passing and ran to get help. Your man was thrown off, and they picked him up—they say he won't live. The coachman was tangled up with the reins; they found his body this morning. They are dragging the river now for you and Lady Mendip. The man says they have pulled out her cloak. The river was running very high last night after all the rain."

Silence again, except for the ticking of the clock.



Sir Charles stared out on to the lawn, where a little red squirrel was burying acorns in a flower-bed.

"Now that's a d——d queer little fellow," he murmured thoughtfully; "he'll forget that he put 'em in there, and you'll have that flower-bed full of little oak-trees when the spring comes."

"What are you going to do?" asked Lady Elystan hoarsely.

Sir Charles made a great effort, and twisted the button the other way round.

"They will say that you arranged to murder your wife—that you made the men drunk—that it was all planned. What will you do?"

"Go down to the river and stop the fools dragging for my body," said Sir Charles.

## CHAPTER IX.

"'Tis the maid wi' the red head," said Isaac, the little man who had worked upon Ringlett's farm all his life. He looked like the malignant dwarf of some Norse fairy tale as he threw back his head to watch his master's face. "'Tis well known—they never bring no luck."

"None of that nonsense," said the farmer sharply. "Go about your work, and if you talk like that again, I'll dock your wage."

His brow was clouded as he strode back to the farm in the dusk. He never meant to leave his wife alone from morning to night on her first day with the strange girl; but from the time of his getting up in the morning, one mishap had followed upon another in a way that was some excuse for Isaac's black looks and hints. One of the horses fell lame, for no reason that ~~was~~ evident; the sick cow, who had seemed on the road to recovery, was much worse; one of the scythes could not be found; a man engaged to help with the thrashing failed to arrive; the sheep had been worried by a dog whom no one had seen before, who appeared suddenly and vanished as soon as he was discovered. There had been no time for the farmer to go back to the house

for the midday dinner, and he was very uneasy as to what he might find on his return. His wife had taken to Honor on her arrival, but there was no saying whether the fancy would last, or how the girl would behave with no one to keep an eye on her.

He came in by a gate at the back, and as he went past the kitchen window, he looked in. Supper was ready on the table.

Honor had not lighted the candles made by dipping rushes into mutton fat; she was spinning by the glow of the fire, and singing softly as she span—

“The twelvemonth and the day was past,  
The ghost began to speak,  
What make you sitting upon my grave,  
And will not let me weep?”

Mrs Lapworth was lying on the settle, with a patch-work quilt flung over her. Honor's finger went up as the farmer entered.

“Asleep? there's a good maid! You needn't be afraid of my waking her. When she sleeps, she sleeps.”

He stood by the settle looking down at her, while Honor kindled a light, and set the chairs to the table.

“She never closed an eye last night, nor the night before. I couldn't get her to sleep.”

“She was very restless all day,” said Honor. “Then I found out that the hum of the wheel seemed to make her drowsy.”

“We'll leave her to sleep and have our supper. 'Tis the best way for her,” said the farmer. “She is happy while she is asleep; when she wakes, she may begin to skreel, and then nothing can stop her.”

"Was it an illness that made her like this?" asked Honor.

"No, no illness; 'twas an accident. She fell down those stairs, wi' the child in her arms. 'Twas a maid child, and our only one, born when both our sons were big lads. I came in here to my dinner and found a heap on the floor."

"Was the child hurt too?"

"Dead — stark dead. I thought they were both dead."

"And Mrs Lapworth has been ill ever since then?"

"Ever since. I took her all the way to Portsmouth to a doctor. He said the fall had harmed her back and her head, and he could do nothing for her, not if King George himself was to ask it. So I brought her home. She sits there, wisht, most of the time, but sometimes 'tis as if she remembered and then she'll cry for hours together."

"Is she in pain?"

"I don't know; the doctor couldn't tell me. He said he had never heard of anything like it. He thought she didn't know one from another, and that's not true. She knows me always, though I don't think she knows the lads, and some folk she can't bear near her. It took a terrible time for her to settle down wi' Susan. I've never seen her take to any one as she has taken to you."

Supper was finished in silence. Honor was beginning to clear away the plates, when the farmer suddenly asked—

"Do you think you will be able to stay? Is the work too hard?"

"There is very little work to do," said Honor.

"Aye, Mrs South does the cooking and a good deal

else; she's a terrible one for work. But she's only here for part of the day, and she's no time for talk, she says——"

"She says so," echoed Honor demurely, and then the recollection of Mrs South's unending flow of words set her off laughing. The farmer's eyes twinkled in sympathy, though all he said was—

"Poor old body! she's so deaf, she can't hear any one speak, so she must do the talking herself. But it's lonesome for you, with no other young maid to speak to, and you'll find that no one comes up to the farm. They think my poor mistress is bewitched, and 'tis unlucky to come nigh her."

"I shall do very well," Honor assured him, thinking that if she had looked all over the country for a hiding-place from Sir Charles, she scarcely could have found a better one.

In two or three days, it felt as though she had been at the farm for a twelvemonth. As the farmer had said, it was "lonesome" for a girl not yet sixteen. In the morning she rose, before it was light, to get the breakfast, and to make a cup of tea for the sick woman, who very often did not get out of bed till nearly dinner-time. Mrs South came in to cook the dinner and to do the greater part of the cleaning. Sometimes the farmer and Isaac came in to dinner, sometimes they took their dinner out with them, to Honor's great relief; besides the natural disgust caused by his primitive table manners, the dwarf caused her more fear than any one except the husband from whom she had run away. He never looked her fairly in the face, but an unexpected turn of the head would give her a moment's glimpse of a venomous scowl; if he saw that she noticed it, and the farmer were looking the



other way, he would twist his face into horrible contortions in the hope of making her start and turn pale. After the first, he never had this pleasure; Honor forced herself to gaze at him without flinching.

On the fourth day of Honor's visit, the farmer, suddenly turning round, caught Isaac making mouths at her, rose from table, and picking up the dwarf by the scruff of the neck, carried him out of the house and quietly dropped him upon a heap of straw in the barn.

"You'll feed here!" he said shortly, and went back to the kitchen.

That evening, Honor, going out to the dairy with a jug, brushed against a dark shadow seated on the fence. It was Isaac cutting notches in a long stick, and as she passed him he spat after her viciously.

"Red head! red head!" croaked his harsh voice. "Ten notches on the tally! ten days to drive ill-luck away. Red head! never bring no good."

Honor tried to laugh, and put the dwarf out of her mind, but her spirits and strength alike were flagging. It was not that the work expected of her was hard; in the last few months at Witham she had often more to do, if both Miss Lester and Nurse Tanner were ill in bed, the one with her cough, the other with her rheumatism. It was the isolation that weighed upon her; even in London, where everything was strange and many things were repugnant to her, there had been Jane and the children. Here there was no one to speak half a dozen words to her in the day. The farmer, in the little time that he spent in the house, would sit silent gazing at his wife. Mrs South's tongue never stopped, from the moment when she

entered the house in the morning, to the moment when she left it, towards evening, but the Sussex dialect in which she spoke prevented Honor from understanding one word in ten of what she said, and she was so deaf as to miss three-quarters of what was said to her, and to mistake the rest.

Mrs Lapworth had subsided into the stillness and apathy which, according to her husband, was her normal condition. She seemed not to notice Honor, generally sitting with half-closed eyes and restless fingers, picking at the strings of her apron, or fidgeting with a ball of yarn which was kept as her plaything. If Honor was out of the room for more than a few moments, however, there would come low whimpers, which changed shortly into long wailing cries, and persisted until Honor came hurrying back. The girl's only chance of doing any work outside the kitchen was when Mrs Lapworth was in bed, or, at odd times, when she drowsed upon the settle.

Luckily for Honor, her predecessor, Susan, had been what Mrs South called "a gentleman"—that is to say, she had done no hard work, making the excuse of waiting upon her aunt, although Mrs Lapworth never fretted after her in her absence. Mrs South lived up to her reputation as "a terrible worker," and most of Honor's time was spent in nothing more laborious than mending or spinning.

This made it all the stranger that she grew daily more weary and languid. Every morning it was more of an exertion to drag herself out of bed, and yet her nights were broken and restless, disturbed by evil dreams and feverish thoughts.

It was a week after her arrival at the farm that Honor, coming downstairs into the kitchen, noticed a

strange pattern of interwoven bars stained in dark purple-red upon the hearthstone. How did it come there? There was none of it last night when she went to bed. Perhaps it was done by Mr Lapworth, whom she had left sitting over the fire; he had an odd fancy for tracing on the hearthstone with a piece of charcoal, but he rubbed out whatever he drew before going to rest. Whoever did it, she had no time to trouble herself about it, for she was late already, and the farmer might be coming in to his breakfast at any moment.

When he came he was even more silent and pre-occupied than usual, returning her "Good-morning" and sitting down without another word. She was sipping her cup of skim-milk, feeling strangely disinclined for food, and the farmer had bitten a large mouthful from a hunk of bread-and-butter, when he suddenly started up and went to the hearth.

"What's this? Who put this here?"

There was such a blaze of anger in the light-coloured eyes that Honor shrank back for the moment.

"Don't be frightened, my maid: I'm not angry with you," he said in a gentler tone. "Do you know who put this here?"

"I found it when I came downstairs."

"Have you ever found anything like it before?"

Honor shook her head, wondering what there could be in a lattice-pattern on the hearthstone to make him angry.

"Tell that woman to wash it off as soon as she comes," he said, and strode out of the room, leaving his breakfast unfinished.

Honor was in the little room on the other side of the porch where Mrs Lapworth slept, helping the invalid into her clothes, when the clashing of a saucepan and

the tread of a heavy foot, followed by a steady murmur, proclaimed Mrs South's arrival. Immediately afterwards came a loud crash, and close upon it several smaller crashes, as if Mrs South had dropped crockery. Honor hurried back to the kitchen, and beheld the shepherd's wife staring at the hearthstone with that expression of horror blended with delight usually worn by her class when confronted with some unpleasant disease or accident.

"What is that?" called Honor, pointing to the hearthstone.

Mrs South looked up to the bacon swinging from the rafters, and shook her head, then looked round the walls, and finally down to the ground, when, with a dramatic start, she suddenly appeared to be aware of two broken willow-pattern plates at her feet.

"Well, now! to think o' that!" she exclaimed, stooping to pick them up.

Honor grasped her arm, and pointed again to the hearthstone.

"Who did that?"

"They slipped out of my hands, and went on to the floor," replied Mrs South, still obstinately regarding the broken plates. "'Tis footy stuff." (Three generations later a connoisseur would have bought those plates for their weight in gold.)

"The master says it is to be washed off at once," said Honor, still indicating the hearthstone.

Mrs South, with great show of zeal, fetched a broom, and began to sweep up the pieces.

"Ef you'd not left 'em so near the edge of the table, they'd never ha' gone through my hands so quick," she remarked inconsequently. "But there! footy stuff I say they be."



Not even when Honor brought water and a cloth, and made signs of rubbing the hearthstone, could Mrs South be driven from her attitude of persistent misunderstanding.

"Bain't the day for washing the kitchen floor," she remarked severely, and clattered out to the farmyard.

It was near to dinner-time when Honor, in despair, caught up the cloth and brick and began to scour the hearthstone herself.

The reddish pattern seemed fast dyed upon it; as she knelt, the heat of the fire burned into her brain. She turned giddy, and would have rolled over, if the farmer, coming in, had not snatched her away, just in time.

"What be you doin'?" he asked angrily. "Who told you to touch it?"

"I could not make Mrs South understand," gasped Honor, from the settle where he had put her down.

"We'll see about that," he said curtly. "Where's the mistress?"

"One of her sleepy fits came on, just when I had dressed her, so I left her lying on her bed."

"She'll sleep till night then. If dinner's ready we'll sit down to it."

Mrs South coming in at that moment, and about to draw her chair up to the table, was stopped by her master, who set the chair back against the wall.

"You'll not sit down to your victuals till you've cleaned that hearthstone."

Mrs South glared at him sulkily for a moment, then muttering "Ef you will hev *they* comin' down the chimney you will," set to work.

"You're looking very flue," said the farmer to Honor as he finished dinner.



"My head aches," Honor confessed.

"'Tis the heat! Go out into the air, get some blackberries, there's plenty, and the mistress likes them. She won't wake before evening, and Mrs South can stay by her."

It was a cool, fine afternoon, with a bright sun, and a brisk wind blowing the little clouds over the sky. Everything seemed fresh and sweet after the heat of the kitchen and the strong smell of the beans and bacon which Mrs South had boiled for dinner. The throbbing pain in Honor's temples grew less as she wandered up and down the fields.

Blackberries still hung on the bushes, though many, over-ripe, had dropped into the tangles of grass and leaves beneath. The greedy birds, with the usual contempt for the popular belief that berries are sent to save them from starving in the winter, were picking the hips and haws to pieces, marring their crimson splendour. Children and squirrels had left some of the nuts to dangle overhead, and in hedges, and on the commons, the sloes were purpling, having felt the touch of frost that is supposed to mellow their flavour. On the hillside a bare patch showed where the bracken had been cut; further on, it still displayed its yellow stems and hard brown foliage. A great elm-tree, half-way down the hill, caught by the wind and the sun, flared pure gold.

Honor's basket was heavy when she came to a little wood. Though she had never crossed it, she knew that on the other side were fields belonging to the farm. She went along a narrow track among the trees. In the spring the ground beneath her feet would be starred with white anemones where it was not misty with bluebells; in autumn it was covered with dead

leaves, through which she went with a child's pleasure in the rustling, hushing sound. One of her earliest memories was of running through dead leaves on the pathway leading to the church at Witham and falling down among them, to be picked up by Nurse Tanner, with a reproof for running in the churchyard.

There was no one to lift her now if she fell. Yes, the farmer had picked her up that morning or her head would have gone into the fire. He was stronger than a woman and more gentle. Honor was beginning to see that there might be men in the world of another type from Sir Charles Mendip or Mr Rivers.

She saw Farmer Lapworth, at the close of a long day's work, come back with a smile for the wife who could do nothing for his comfort, could not give him so much as a cheerful word. She knew how, night after night, he would sit beside a restless, fretful invalid until she fell asleep, and often had no sleep himself. Whatever happened, his first thought was for her, and he thought himself rewarded if he could fancy that she smiled. After a week spent in his house, Honor wondered whether perhaps there could be marriages which were not merely a question of settlements and Mechlin lace. "But they must have been married in church," she said to herself.

By this time the trees were growing thin; she was on the outskirts of the wood. She struggled through a thicket of guelder rose bushes and found herself in a bare field on the hillside. A little brook ran past her, almost hidden beneath huge burdock leaves. At one end of the field a space had been cleared as for a flower-bed; there was a bush of sweet-briar, a bush of lavender, clumps of southernwood and Michaelmas daisies, and among them knelt Farmer Lapworth, busily

weeding. Something in his look and attitude struck Honor with a sense of awe, and she was about to steal back into the wood when the farmer's dog, who was watching his master with a kindly air of patronage, saw her and gave a short sharp bark.

"You're there, Honor?" said the farmer, turning round. "Come and look at my garden."

Honor came up to him and saw that he was pulling up weeds from around a square block of stone.

"You've never come here before? No, no one comes here but me and Nelson" (Nelson wagged a brindled tail with great vigour and tried to see if there were any scraps in Honor's basket). "'Tis where I buried our maid."

Honor, who had stooped to set down her basket, looked up startled.

"You've a mortial load there. Sit down and rest awhile; there's no need for you to be getting back yet. I'll tell you how it was. It was before we could take her to church to be christened that the mistress fell with her down the stairs; 'tis a long way to church, and the roads in the winter are very ornary. Parson he said she could not be buried by the side of my father and mother because she was dead before she could be christened, and he wanted to put her on the north side of the churchyard, away from all our own folk. She was so little, she'd have been lonesome at nights with none to speak to. So I brought her here where the sun shines, and I planted flowers to make it bright for her. If she can't hear the church bells ring, she can hear me going up and down. It's not so gay now as it is earlier in the year, but it smells sweet."

"You have two sons, haven't you?" asked Honor shyly.

"I hope I have, but I don't rightly know. Jack, he was taken by the pressgang last year when he'd gone down to see his aunt and uncle, near Arundel. I've had one letter from him since then. He said his ship was going out to the Spanish Main, where we used to fight in old days. If he isn't dead or drowned, maybe he'll be coming home some day. Jem is down on the marshes with the sheep; he's coming over here in a day or two. 'Tis a dull house for the lads now that their mother can't speak to them. If our maid had lived it would have been different. A child about the place brightens it up. She'd have been old enough by now to be a comfort to her brothers."

He gently scraped a little moss from the stone with his clasp-knife and pulled up a tuft of grass.

"The weeds grow quicker than the flowers almost. I put primroses here for the spring, and take 'em up when they've done flowering. That's a rare place for violets, that bank; you'll find one or two hidden away under the leaves all the year round. Then, in winter, there's that little holly bush on the top of the bank, covered with red berries; there's always a bit of colour for her."

"It is beautiful," said Honor, suddenly finding tears coming to her eyes. The farmer looked at her with a quiet puzzled surprise. "Don't cry, my maid; there's nothing to cry for. I've done my best for her, but if I'd been a rich man, she should have had something better."

"A monument?" asked Honor, with a vision of the ponderous slabs adorned with jolter-headed cherubim, skulls, scythes, hour-glasses, and moral sentiments with which the mourners of her day honoured their dead.

"No, not exactly a monument: a big church would



be what I would build. When I was a boy my father's brother, who was in the trade, took me over to France for a run. We went to a town on a river in Normandy. I can't rightly remember its name, but long ago it belonged to the English, and they burned a young woman there that was helping the French to drive them out."

A recollection of Miss Lester's teaching flashed across Honor's mind. "Joan of Arc? Was it Rouen?"

"You've got it! that's the name. It was full of churches, and each of them more won'nerful than the other. There was one that was the pick of them all. Tall, tall pillars, springing out of the ground as if they grew like the trees, and rising up and up; and when your head was quite giddy staring up after them, you could look down and see them reflected, pillars, arches, and all, in a big basin of water by the door. I was always making off to that church, and my uncle he used to laugh at me. It was like tearing something up by the roots when I had to come back to England."

"You have never seen it again?"

"No, never. There's none of it left, 'tis likely, for they tell me that when the Frenchies chopped the heads off their king and queen, they broke down the churches and shut 'em up. But I can see it all still, every line of it. If I were a rich man, I'd build it up here in this field over our maid. There was a gentleman told me once that long ago there were men that used to go from place to place building up churches. They must have been happy. I'd have liked to be one of them."

He fell silent, looking up at the sky, and Honor did not venture another question.

"Well," he said at last, rousing himself, "I must go



about my work and you must go to yours. Don't you go to do that woman's work another day."

"What did it mean?" asked Honor, curiosity overpowering her shyness. "Why was that pattern on the hearthstone? Did Mrs South put it there?"

"If she didn't put it there, she knew who did, the old fool! 'Twas to keep away the witches, most likely, or the Pharisees."

"The Pharisees? Mrs South said that if she did not get home before dark the Pharisees would interrupt her, and I did not know what she meant."

"Pack o' nonsense," said the farmer shortly. "Take the mistress her blackberries and never mind a tiresome old woman's chatter. There's no such thing as witches or Pharisees, and I've told her so more times than you could count."

## CHAPTER X.

ON the following morning the farmer did not come in to breakfast at his usual time. Honor drank a cupful of milk, and was about to go to Mrs Lapworth's room, when she heard his step in the hall.

"I'm late," he said, dropping into the big chair by the fireplace. "I don't want nothing to eat. You can clear away the breakfast."

Honor stared at him aghast. His eyes were dull and deep-sunk in their sockets, his face was pinched, its colour as yellow as that of his wife.

"What is it? Are you ill?"

"I'll be better some day," he managed to say between the chattering of his teeth. "Stir up the fire, will you? It's terrible cold."

Mrs South, coming to her day's work, stopped short in the middle of the floor, and regarded her master critically, her arms akimbo. Her head bent forward to one side and her black-and-white shawl gave her something of the appearance of an elderly magpie.

"I telled you so!" was her remark when she had surveyed him all over. "Now perhaps you'll be sorry that you made me scour the hearthstone."

"What is it?" shouted Honor in her ear.

"'Tis the axey," replied Mrs South, scratching her head with such an air of subdued triumph as might have been worn by the legendary cats who saw Harriet burned down to her little scarlet shoes, "and he best knows how he got it. If *they* bain't kept off——"

"If you talk any more nonsense, woman, I'll take you by the shoulders and put you out of the door," interrupted Lapworth. "I get these ague fits every autumn, as you know well enough."

"Oo'man, indeed!" snorted Mrs South. "Who be you callin' a oo'man? D'you want me to make you some cobweb pills?"

The growl that came from the big chair could not be ignored even by ears as dull as Mrs South's, and she retreated to the back kitchen to make as much clatter as possible over the washing-up, while Honor tried to find out whether anything could be done to relieve Lapworth.

Apparently there was nothing, or else he was too sick and miserable to think of it. He would sit quietly over the fire, he said, and maybe the fit would pass off. Isaac must do as best he could, without his master's help. He gave a smile and nod of thanks when Honor put one of the settle cushions behind his head, and wrapped the quilt about his knees, and then lay back in the chair, either dozing, or pretending to doze. Honor was inclined to think the latter, for she saw his brows frowning continually over the closed eyelids, and caught little sighs of pain or weariness.

She wondered whether Mrs Lapworth would be much affected by her husband's illness, and it was a relief to find her in her most apathetic state, taking no notice of anything. The poor girl felt as if all the

cares of the world were upon her shoulders that morning, with two invalids to nurse, and herself strangely ill and languid. Was she going to have the ague? she wondered, as she dragged herself about the kitchen, which was as hot as a furnace, the farmer rousing himself at intervals to pile more wood on the fire. Mrs South was no help to any one, breaking everything she touched, and keeping up such a fusilade of bangs, crashes, and thumps as sent little quivering shafts of pain through Honor's head, and must have been torture to the farmer, though he neither moved nor spoke. If Honor tried to make her understand that she must be quiet, the old woman stared at her insolently, and kept up a muttering below her breath.

The midday dinner was an empty ceremony for all except Mrs South, who carried off the dishes into the back kitchen, and apparently ate for four persons; there was nothing left when Honor passed out on her way to the dairy.

In the days when Mrs Lapworth was in good health her dairy had been one of the best in the county. Since her accident no more butter and cheese were made than were used by the farmer's household. Honor looked round at the bare shelves, the huge empty crocks piled one on another, and again thought of Lapworth's wonderful patience and tenderness with the wife who was nothing but a burden in every way.

It was cool and quiet in the dairy; Honor sighed with relief as she bent over the churn. To be alone, to be able to look round her with no fear of meeting Isaac's malignant scowl, Mrs South's sullen defiance, or even poor Mrs Lapworth's vacant stare, was such relief that she prolonged the work as much as possible,

reluctant to go back. If Mrs Lapworth began to fret her husband could soothe her.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, driven at last beyond his patience by Mrs South's din, the farmer bade her "wisht" in a tone that took no denial. In the following silence he fell into a real sleep, from which he was disturbed all too soon by a rapping at the door of the porch.

With a great effort he dragged himself away from the fire, and peeped out cautiously through a side window. An elderly footman in livery with a basket upon his arm was knocking upon the door with his cane; behind him, filling the porch lengthways and breadthways, stood a majestic figure in a black satin cloak and large black bonnet.

"'Tis Madam herself!" groaned poor Lapworth in dismay. "Well, if this doesn't beat everything."

For the last five-and-thirty years the Squire's wife had been to her own class an example of practical piety, to her husband's tenants and poorer neighbours, and to young people of every degree, an active embodiment of the Nemesis attending on their acts. Every morning saw her busy in the village school, built and maintained at her own expense, where several successive generations learned much that was of use to them in after life, besides the three R's and the Church Catechism. When the scholars were old enough to leave school, she took some into her own establishment for training, and found situations for others; those who went out into the world were at all times sure of a welcome at Dykelands, if they came back to the village. There were few afternoons when the pony carriage was not to be met in the lanes taking Madam Marsh on her rounds to admonish the



erring, to advise the ill-counselled, to bring little comforts to the old and ailing, to read to the sick, and to prescribe for every ailment or disaster, from a love-crossed girl's hysterics to a smoking chimney, or a leg cut off by a scythe.

The awe of her was all over the countryside, in a circuit of many miles. Nearly every man, woman, and child, from her own husband to the poacher committed for trial at the next assizes, had taken her medicines and listened to her admonitions, and it would be difficult to say which were regarded with more terror. The worst that could be said by the village patriarch to illustrate Napoleon's defiance of the Powers of Europe, was the assurance that "if that there Bony were to land, he wouldn't care the snap of his fingers for any man, not even for Madam Marsh."

Popular opinion inclined to believe that if "Bony" once permitted Madam to dose him, his attitude would change. "Anyway, I'll never hev to take no more of her stuff," said an abandoned character, when Madam declared that she should not enter his cottage again unless he reformed in some particulars, and his audience, though shocked, felt a secret thrill of sympathy.

The farmer did not feel equal to encountering Madam, when in the grip of the ague. He was wondering whether he could effect his escape by the back door, and send Honor to meet the attack, when round the corner of the house came Mrs South, who, on perceiving Madam, began to dip curtsies.

"Good morning, Mrs South," said the great lady in a rounded deliberate voice. "I came to see Mrs Lapworth. Is she in the kitchen?"

"Yes, ma'am, and the master too. He was took mortal bad with the axey."

"How very fortunate that I should have come to-day! I have some medicine that will soon put him to rights. Tobias, you can give me the basket; go on to Mrs Marston to get the eggs, and be sure to come back within half an hour."

In Mr Lapworth's opinion, this encounter was anything but fortunate. But there was no retreat; Madam was upon him.

"How's this, Mr Lapworth? I hear you have the ague again. Sit down—no, not there—there might be a draught from the window." The farmer was waved into a chair in what he considered the most unsuitable situation. "How is Mrs Lapworth? Still the same, I see. They told me that your niece had gone home, because her father met with an accident. So I came round to see what you were doing without her."

"I take it very kindly of you, ma'am," answered Lapworth, fidgeting uneasily as he saw the lady place her basket on the table under the window. "We're doing well enough."

Madam began to draw off her gloves, with the deliberate and capable air which accompanied every act of her life. "And how long have you had this ague?"

"It was never bad at all till this morning," said Lapworth hastily, with one eye upon the basket, "and it will be better to-morrow, perhaps."

"No perhaps about it, if you do as I tell you," said Madam, turning over the contents of the basket. "That's the emulsion for Mrs Tigg's baby—that—no, that's the Bible for Jane Wood, she's going to service in Petworth, a very good situation, and I hope she'll keep it. It must be at the bottom of the basket. I shall have to turn all the things out."

"Don't trouble yourself, ma'am, pray," was the far-

mer's entreaty. "I never take no notice of these fits—they come and they go. There'd never be an end of it if I was to take physic for them."

"I made it for old David, but he won't have finished what I gave him until this evening, and I can send up some more to-morrow morning," pursued the lady inflexibly. "If you continue to refuse physic, you will probably find yourself in the grave before long."

"My sister's husband near Arundel, he's had the ague for years, and he says just the same, and he's an older man than me," said Lapworth hastily.

"I suppose that is the reason why he is so ill that he has been obliged to send for Susan to come home."

"No, indeed, ma'am, begging your pardon, 'twas nothing of the sort. He fell off the corn-stack and broke his hip."

"What are they doing for him? Is the doctor attending him?"

Seeing Madam Marsh turn round in her chair and cease to hunt through her basket, the farmer hoped that her attention might be diverted from himself to another sufferer. He gave such particulars as he knew of his brother-in-law's accident, deeply regretting that the parish clerk who wrote the letter for Susan's mother had filled up the sheet with religious consolations and moral sentiments rather than with medical details, so that he was unable to spin out the story until the return of the footman and the pony carriage.

Madam Marsh listened with compressed mouth and thoughtful eye, nodding or shaking her head at intervals.

"He must be bled again, of course; and then——"

There followed minute instructions, concluding with a promise to write them all down for Susan, as Madam

did not suppose that Mr Lapworth would be able to remember them.

"Now for some medicine," she continued, turning back to the table. "Yes, this is it. To be taken in the morning, fasting, and again when you go to bed. There's enough here for three days, and I shall come again, the day after to-morrow, to see how far you have benefited by it. Who in the world is that young person with the curls?"

Lapworth looked over Madam's shoulder, and following the direction of her large forefinger, saw Honor crossing the yard at the back of the farmhouse.

"'Tis a maid that's come to take Susan's place till her father be well enough for her to come back. A good young maid she be, nicely spoken, very wisht, and the mistress took to her from the first."

"I don't know her by sight," said the old lady, putting up her glass. "What is her name? Honor Lester? There's no such name anywhere in this neighbourhood."

"No, she's a foreigner—from the Shires, I think. Mrs Cope promised to find some one for me at the hiring fair last week, and she sent me this maid."

"I do not understand this in the least." Madam Marsh put down her glass, and spoke with more than her usual deliberation. "I saw Mrs Cope in Petworth last night, and she told me that Susan had been obliged to go home, and that she had been unable to find a girl for you at the hiring fair. Did this girl tell you that Mrs Cope had sent her?"

"I thought so." Lapworth's head was too dizzy for him to remember anything very clearly.

"Do you mean to tell me that you took her into your house without knowing anything about her?"



"I thought Mrs Cope knew all about her," said the farmer helplessly. "She came here that evening, and she never said she didn't come from Mrs Cope."

"I don't understand it," repeated Madam. "What has she told you about herself?"

"Nothing. I never asked her."

Honor came back across the courtyard to the dairy, walking slowly and wearily, unaware of the eyes that were upon her.

With her petticoat tucked up high, and her curls in disorder after her buttermaking, she looked more of a child than usual.

"When does your son come up from the Marshes?" asked Madam, suddenly turning upon the farmer.

"Maybe to-morrow, maybe next day."

"Then you'll send that child out of your house to-morrow at latest," pronounced Madam.

"I can't promise to do that, ma'am, unless you can give me some good reason. She's a good maid, and I can't turn her away for nothing." The farmer spoke respectfully, but very decidedly.

"I should not expect you to turn her away, Mr Lapworth. But for her own sake, as well as yours, you must see that you cannot keep such a young girl here with no older woman to keep her in order. It is not as if Mrs Lapworth were able to look after her. When I came down here this afternoon, it was to propose an arrangement which should answer very well. Jenny Taylor has come home: her master died suddenly, and her mistress is going to live with a brother at Rye. I don't approve of young persons loitering about at home in idleness, or gadding up and down the lanes. So she can come here for the present. She's a strong, healthy young woman, and



far fitter for hard work than that girl in the dairy."

"There's been no need for Honor to do any hard work," interposed the farmer. "There's Mrs South to do that. Honor was to wait on the mistress, and she does it very well."

"That brings me to another point," pursued the lady, going on without haste or stay inflexibly as a steam-roller. "I do not consider Mrs South at all a good associate for a young girl. She chatters and gossips, she is never seen at church, she is very untidy in her person. Jenny is of an age to take warning by her; but the other girl is much younger, and might be led into bad habits. Jenny will come down here to-morrow morning, when I am sending Anson with the taxed cart into Petworth. On the way back, about twelve o'clock, he will call for the girl and bring her up to Dykelands. Mrs Carrage tells me she wants more help in the still-room; and if the girl is clean, handy, and obliging, I may keep her for a little time and give her some training before sending her out to another situation."

"That's very kind of you, ma'am, I'll not deny," said the farmer weakly. Another shivering fit was coming on, and he would have agreed to any arrangement provided that Madam Marsh would leave the house before his teeth were chattering audibly. While she unfolded her plan she had been repacking her basket and absently had put in David's medicine with the other things; if she could be hurried away at once she might not notice her mistake.

"It feels heavy," he remarked, turning his swimming eyes to the window. "I should not wonder if we had

thunder before dark." He knew that Madam's stout little pony had only one fault—that of becoming unmanageable in a thunderstorm.

"I must hasten back," said Madam, rising with as much haste as was possible for a lady of her size wearing a coal-scuttle bonnet. "I thank you, Mr Lapworth, but I am quite able to carry my basket to the gate. You must not think of coming to the door, for fear of catching cold. Good-day, Mr Lapworth. I hope your son will return in good health."

The door closed upon the rustling black figure, to open again in another moment.

"I had forgotten one thing, Mr Lapworth. You had better warn the young girl that I shall expect her to cut off those curls when she comes into my house. They are not at all suitable to her position."

The latch fell with a sharp click. The farmer, thinking all danger was over, collapsed into the chair out of which Madam had routed him, and was wrapping the quilt once more round his knees when the porch resounded to a heavy tread. Tobias pushed the kitchen door open and deposited a large green bottle upon the table.

"Madam sent this, and you be to take two spoonfuls at night and two in the morning; and don't you take nothing else but a little gruel, made very thin, until she come to see you again."

## CHAPTER XI.

WHETHER Madam Marsh's draught had really a wholesome effect, or whether it merely compelled the patient to exert himself in order to escape from taking more of it, after spending the evening alternately shivering and burning, Mr Lapworth found himself better next morning. He was very weak and shaky, which he ungratefully attributed to the medicine rather than to the ague, so he decided to lie in bed till near breakfast-time. After breakfast he thought he might be able to go out and see what Isaac had been doing.

As he dressed himself, he remembered that Honor must be told that she was going to Dykelands. His conscience troubled him: he ought not to have agreed to the arrangement without sending for the girl and hearing what she had to say about it. She might not wish to go to Dykelands. (There was a button come off his waistcoat. What fools women were! 'Twas their job to sew on buttons, and they never did it so that the things could stand no manner of strain.) If she did not wish to go, that showed that she did not know what was for her good. How could he send for her when she was out in the

dairy, and he was feeling too bad to walk across the floor, and Madam's voice going through his head? He had done the best he could for her, as he would for a maid of his own; besides, every one knew 'twas no manner of use to contradict old Madam. She had her way with every one, from the Squire to the schoolmistress; and if she said Honor was to go to Dykelands, to Dykelands she would have to go.

(That last tug had pulled two buttons off his gaiters; he could not think what thread they used, to have so little hold.) At any rate, he ought to have told Honor what had been settled for her good when she came in from the dairy. No, that was nonsense too. How could he be expected to talk when he was all of a shake and his brains felt as if they were fizzling in his skull? There might have been a score of little devils knocking red-hot nails into the back of his head and over his eyes, and just along the parting of his hair. Suppose she had set to work to argue, as women would, that would have brought another score of them. The recollection of his sufferings was so vivid that Mr Lapworth dismissed all further thought of Honor and her affairs for the present, determining to have his breakfast before giving his mind to the subject.

It was all the more annoying when he came downstairs, a full quarter of an hour after the proper time for breakfast, to find nothing ready and Honor trying to light the fire.

"Hey, now! what's this? Where's my breakfast?"

"I was late this morning," said Honor, rising from her knees, after thrusting a twig into a suitable crevice. "I overslept myself."

Her pale cheeks and heavy eyes did not look as if the sleep had done her any good.



"Those sticks are damp," said the farmer, picking up one from the hearth. "Looks as if you never put them to dry last night."

"I forgot." In her hurry to lay the table Honor upset the milk-jug.

"Lucky there was nothing in it," her master said drily as he picked it up. "More haste, less speed. It's no use trying to overtake the time you've lost lying in bed; I'd rather wait a few minutes for breakfast than have all the china broken."

It did not tend to help the process of getting breakfast that the farmer was sitting in the chair by the fire. It was partly because he felt too weak to go out into the air without food, partly that he might be able to blow up the fire which was unwilling to burn; but to Honor it seemed that he was there on purpose to watch all that she did, and to find fault with it. Everything went wrong under his eye: she broke a mug, she burned a cloth, and upset most of the contents of the kettle over the fire, which at once gave up the struggle and went out.

"What's the matter with you?" cried Lapworth irritably. "Your fingers are all thumbs this morning! You've no hard work to do,—you might set breakfast before dinner-time."

"What's got everybody this morning?" asked Mrs South, slipping out of her clogs at the back door. "You be mortal late—and the fire out, too. Well, I niver! And how be you to-day, master? How did the physic work?"

"Get the fire to burn and hold your tongue," was Lapworth's reply.

Whether by good luck or good management, Mrs South had the fire burning in a few minutes. Honor



made Mrs Lapworth's cup of tea, while the farmer began upon his breakfast.

"She's not drunk a drop of it," he observed, when Honor came back with the cup. "What was wrong with it? Hadn't you got the water to boil?"

"She was sleeping, and I couldn't wake her, so I left her to sleep," said Honor wearily, dropping into a chair. "If she wakes before dinner, I'll make her another cup."

"Drink it up yourself, then, it will do you good," said the farmer in a more kindly tone. "You're looking flue again. Madam was right; this isn't a good place for you."

Honor put down the tea untasted. "What do you mean?"

Before answering, the farmer went across the room and shut the door into the back kitchen, where Mrs South was clattering saucepans.

"Madam Marsh was here yesterday," he said, coming back to his seat, "and she was saying that you were—well, you were—you were too young for this sort of place, it's too hard work for such a young maid."

Honor shot one of the sidelong glances with which she had achieved making Mr Rivers uncomfortable, and the farmer found himself suddenly in agreement with Isaac and Mrs South, that there was something unnatural about her.

"You're—you're too young," he repeated, glad to fall back upon something that did not admit of argument. "Madam, she knew of a young woman that's just come home from her situation, and she'll be coming here to-day to do for us for a bit."

"How will Mrs Lapworth like her?" Honor was rolling a scrap of bread into little crumbs on the tablecloth, and did not look up as she asked.

"Eat your victuals or leave 'em, but don't you waste 'em that way," he said sharply. "Good bread is none too plentiful. Jane was here once before for a week, when Susan wanted to go home, and the mistress never seemed to dislike her."

"You say she is coming here to-day?" Something in Honor's tone provoked the good man. Though he did not know it, it was the tone of a great lady in displeasure with her inferior, and to him it vaguely suggested "airs."

"She may be here any minute, so it would be as well if you were to tidy the place up a bit. The bailiff is bringing her in the taxed cart, and on his way back from Petworth he'll call for you, and take you up to Dykelands."

"To Dykelands?" Honor's eyes widened, and she drew back her head with a gesture of dignified surprise that added to Lapworth's irritation. "I am not going to Dykelands."

"Aye, but you are. Madam was so good as to say that she would take you into the house for a few days, until she could find another place that would be fitting for you."

"Do you mean to say that you and she arranged this yesterday afternoon without asking me?"

"'Twas the best thing for you, my maid. You're lucky to get the chance. Madam has a rule to take none into her house that don't live on the estate. There's some would give a good deal to be in your shoes."

"They are welcome to them," said Honor, getting up from the table and going over to the window.

Then her dignity suddenly collapsed, and she was no more than a frightened child. "Why must I go? Why

can't I stay here? I'll never be late again in the mornings. Mrs Lapworth is quiet when I am with her. Why should you send me to strangers?"

The short upper lip was quivering, and there were tears in the hazel eyes. Although not yet recovered from the annoyance of being kept waiting for his breakfast, the farmer's heart began to melt.

"Come now, you'll be happy enough in a day or two. You'll find plenty of mates there; Madam has the house full of young maids. Madam is strict, but that's as well, and she's as kind as any can be. She told me that if you behaved well she would keep you on for some time, and give you a good training, the same as she does for the maids out of the village school. 'Twould be a fine thing for you to learn clear-starching, and how to mend lace, and all that, from Madam's own woman."

"I knew how to mend lace, long ago," cried Honor indignantly, and then burst into a violent fit of crying.

"Come, come—none of that," quoth the farmer, in a tone between anger and compassion. She looked so small and childish, sobbing into a pocket-handkerchief, which Mrs South's sharp eyes had noticed as finer than Madam's, that compassion gained the day, and he patted her kindly on the shoulder, as if she had been his own daughter. "Cheer up, my maid, you'll spoil your eyes with crying."

At the touch of his hand Honor turned round upon him, eyes flashing, hands clenched. "How dare you! How dare you touch me?"

"That's a pretty way to behave," exclaimed Lapworth, honestly aghast. "'Tis quite time you did go to Madam, to learn how to govern your temper. You need a tight hand over you. 'Tis no wonder that Mrs South is afraid to come to work while you're here."

Honor turned from him, and began to clear away breakfast. He was going to the door when a sudden recollection of Madam's visit made him stop to say—

"I'll have to pay you your wages before you go. What did Mrs Cope tell you I was giving?"

"I don't know," said Honor indifferently, giving all her attention to folding the tablecloth exactly in its former creases.

"You don't know?" echoed the farmer, bringing his hand down on the table with a mighty slap. "You don't know; why don't you know? I'll tell you why, my maid—'tis because Mrs Cope never sent you here. You've been deceiving me."

Standing over her, with that grim look in his steel-blue eyes and his mouth set hard, Farmer Lapworth would have terrified any ordinary village girl out of her wits. Even Susan, who had the advantage of being his niece, broke into noisy sobs and flung her apron over her head if he exhibited a far smaller degree of displeasure, and Mrs South fled out of the room.

Honor came of those whose pulses beat more steadily in danger. Without moving an inch, she looked up with eyes from which the tears had dried.

"I did not deceive you. I never told you that I came from Mrs Cope."

"You let me think she'd sent you. You never said a word to make me think different."

"It was no concern of mine what you thought," said Honor carelessly. With just such a look and voice had old Madam Basset, her grandmother, spoken to a defaulting man-servant.

"Of all the——" broke out the farmer, and then restrained himself. "'Tis no use talking," he said quietly, and with a certain dignity, "there's something



come over you, and I can do nothing with you. Maybe you were too young to be here without a woman over you; you'll do better with Madam. But if you're wise, you'll tell her the truth at once, whoever you are and wherever you come from. If there's one thing she can't abide, 'tis deceit, the same as myself. And you'll not be able to lie in bed of a morning. And you'll have to learn to be pleasant with your fellow-servants."

Honor sank down to the floor in the deep curtsey which Miss Lester had taught her as soon as she could walk, turned slowly on her heel and slowly walked upstairs, leaving the farmer without power to speak.

"Well, if this doesn't beat everything," he said when he had recovered his breath, taking refuge in his favourite phrase; what else he said need not be repeated.

After he had relieved his feelings in some degree, a glance at the old clock with blue and red cherubs painted on its face set him hurrying out at the back door.

"Jenny will be here in half a minute; it will be better for them to fight it out among themselves."

It is to be noted that in advising Honor for her good, he had not said one word about her curls. A man may look like a Viking, but for all that may lack courage to deal with a woman.



## CHAPTER XII.

HONOR sat on her little truckle-bed, aflame with indignation.

Up to that moment, amid much that was repugnant to her, there had always been the feeling that this was only a play in which she was taking part, not a real portion of her life. She was the princess of a fairy tale, hiding in disguise from her enemies, or set to work among the servants by her cruel stepmother. Some day she would come to her kingdom; how this was to be, Honor's dreams left vague, for in none of them was there any thought of a prince.

To the faithful old woman who had brought her up she was ever the princess.

To the one or two farmers and their wives with whom she was allowed to have anything to do, she was "little Missy," the old Squire's granddaughter, who by rights should have been mistress of Basset Court and Lady of the Manor. Lapworth's distant gentleness, his curious blending of reserve and confidence, were so unlike what might be expected from a man in his position, that she thought herself still the princess with him. Surely he guessed the royal robe under the beggar's rags, even though he seemed not to heed it.

It would have been difficult to find another such

man as Lapworth among the English farmers of his day. In earlier times he might have fulfilled his ambition and become one of the masons whom he envied; if he had been born a hundred years later, poetry and mysticism would have been ground out of him by "education" according to the lights of Whitehall, and in some ways he might have been a happier man. In the Georgian era his characteristics were neither developed nor entirely crushed.

Honor saw only that he was unlike the farmers around Witham, and took for something personal to herself the consideration and kindness which the daughterless man showed to a young girl.

She was sore with anger and humiliation. She had brought herself to ask this man to let her stay as his servant, and he refused. He had dared to clap her upon the shoulder as if she had been a common village girl, and he had lectured her upon her behaviour to her "fellow-servants," thereby evening her to Mrs South and Isaac.

After this she would not stay another hour at the farm, even were he to ask it.

How her head ached! It was always aching. She remembered that she had eaten no breakfast, and half thought of going downstairs, now that the farmer was out of the way, to cut herself a piece of bread and butter. No, she would not eat his food again; she would take nothing from him. She would leave payment for what she had eaten, so that he should know that she owed him nothing. She would write what she had to say, for she would not speak to him again. She remembered that the farmer kept pen and ink in his wife's room, and ran downstairs, meeting no one by the way.

Mrs Lapworth was lying in the deathlike stupor which was her equivalent for sleep. Honor stroked back the loose locks of hair from the wrinkled face and pulled the bedclothes more closely round her, with a touch of regret. "I hope Jenny won't be cruel to you, poor woman," she whispered. "Mrs South is frightened of coming near you, so she won't ill-treat you."

The pen and ink were on the chimneypiece. Honor tore a corner from a piece of rough brown paper that had been used to wrap up the farmer's new beaver hat when it came home, and wrote—

"To pay you for what I have eaten and broken."

Steps sounded on the flags outside, and Honor fled up to her own room before she could be seen by the new arrival. It must be Jenny; she could hear talking in the kitchen, Mrs South's persistent flow of words broken by a louder, shriller voice. Evidently Jenny had good lungs.

Honor wrapped the brown paper round one of her guineas and laid it in a conspicuous position on the window-sill, the only substitute for a table in the bedroom. It might be evidence against her, it might lead to her being traced by Mr Rivers and Sir Charles, but in her bitterness of feeling nothing could stay her from leaving that guinea.

What was to be done now? she asked herself, sitting down again on the edge of the bed. Ill and weary as she felt, she was not fit to take the road again; it would be easier for the moment to let the bailiff drive her to Dykelands in the taxed cart, and wait what might befall her there. But Honor knew that to go to Dykelands would mean resigning the struggle and surrendering herself to Sir Charles. She could

not hope to keep her secret there for a single day. If Madam Marsh were too busy or too dignified to notice such an insignificant person, there were the "young maids" of whom Lapworth spoke—they would sleep three or four of them in the same room, and Honor would have to share a bed with one or other. They would find out at once that she had no clothes except those on her back, and that while on the outside she was dressed as a village girl, her under-linen was fine and soft as silk. She had torn off the lace from it, but nothing could disguise its texture.

The farmer once let fall something about a pedlar who came round every month, and Honor had intended to purchase materials from him, and make them up when sitting with Mrs Lapworth. Meanwhile she had been driven to make use of some of the things discarded by Susan; these she could not take with her to Dykelands.

She must go out into the world again. There was no time to think of a plan. Already the bailiff had fulfilled the first part of his errand, and he would soon return to fetch her; she must be well out of the way before he arrived.

As quietly as she could go in her ill-fitting shoes, she slipped downstairs and out through the porch. The kitchen door was shut, and the women within saw and heard nothing. Mrs South was pinching the skirt of Jenny's wincey gown between finger and thumb, and Jenny was trying to make her understand that though it had belonged to Jenny's former mistress, it was perfectly new and had never been worn. They were good friends by this time, and although hereafter they would quarrel like cat and dog, Jenny would never offend by greater refinement in mind and ways than



the old woman, and so all her other faults could be forgiven.

Outside, on the grass plot, the black cat, his claws tucked primly beneath his chest, was gazing with a wistful and dreamy look at a robin on the bough far above his head.

"Good-bye, Tim," said Honor, stooping to rub his ears; "keep out of Mrs South's way when I am gone, or she'll upset the saucepan over you, and pretend that she did it by accident."

Tim purred disdainfully; he had taken care of himself for many years before Honor came on the scene, and he intended to do so when she went away. She was useful when he wanted his chest tickled or his head scratched, but she need not think herself of any importance to him.

A bitter wind was blowing from behind dark-grey clouds. Honor thought regretfully of Susan's old blue shawl, hanging on a peg in her room. Had she known it, the shawl was one of Mrs South's grievances against her, the old woman having meant to appropriate it after Susan's departure.

It was senseless to stand there shivering; if she walked quickly she might keep herself warm. With a last caress to Tim's sleek head she went through the gate, making a circuit to the back of the farm, and took the path leading across the wood.

Coming in at midday to his dinner, the farmer heard a cheerful voice uplifted in a ballad at that time popular with the Royal Navy. There was no harm in it, for all its coarseness, as there was no harm in Jenny, who was singing it lustily. She was a well-behaved young woman, according to Madam Marsh's severe standard, and no man, gentle or simple, would have



taken a liberty with her twice. But the farmer frowned and sighed, as the ditty caught his ear, insensibly contrasting the nasal drawl, broken by sudden gasps for breath, with the low clear voice that he used to hear crooning to Mrs South.

“When shall we meet again, sweetheart?  
When shall we meet again?”

It was as great a contrast as there was between the slim brown elf, with the tangle of red curls all over her head, and buxom, red-armed, apple-cheeked Jenny, who grinned broadly and dipped to him as he entered the kitchen.

The occasion required him to make inquiries after the health of her family, as he sat at the head of the table, waiting for Mrs South to dish up the dinner. Jenny, who was one of eleven children, was in the midst of a minute description of the swelling on her fourth sister's throat, when he suddenly interrupted her—

“What are you doing there?”

Jenny paused, open-mouthed. In her hand was an autumn bouquet of bright-coloured autumn leaves, long trails of blackberry and tufts of marsh ragwort.

“I was throwin' away them nasty weeds, sir.”

“Leave them alone,” he ordered curtly. Two nights ago he had watched the slender brown fingers arranging the posy, while Mrs Lapworth looked on and seemed to be pleased.

“Where is Honor?” he asked, when Mrs South set the dish in front of him. “She had better get her dinner quick before Mr Anson calls for her.”

Jenny had not set eyes on her; Mrs South thought she was in her room.

"Go up and tell her dinner's ready," said the farmer, and Mrs South very reluctantly obeyed.

She was absent for longer than seemed necessary, and when she came back it was to report that Honor had gone.

"Gone where? Did you see her go?"

No, Mrs South had seen and heard nothing; she only knew that the room was empty. There was a shortness in Mrs South's breath, and a curious look in her eyes, which the farmer interpreted to mean that she was feeling her age, and should not have been sent upstairs just before her dinner.

"Where's she gone? Is she in the dairy?"

Jenny was certain that she was not, having just come from thence herself. Perhaps she had walked a bit down the road to save Mr Anson from coming up the lane.

"She can't have gone off without her wages. Besides, it's raining hard; she'd be drenched to the skin, waiting about in the lane."

At this moment came a loud thump upon the door, and through the window might be seen the portly figure of Mr Anson, who did not wait for the door to be opened to him before giving his opinion of young maids in general and this one in particular. Here had he been waiting for her in the lane for good ten minutes by his watch, and because he could wait no longer, and it was raining, he had been obliged to bring the cart up to the gate, and if the paint had been scratched in the lane, he would not answer for what Madam might say.

When he had expressed himself sufficiently, he yielded to force of circumstances, which in this case meant Mrs South's "toad in a hole" combined with a

heavy downpour of rain, and took his bit of dinner at the farm, although, as he was careful to point out, he was used to wash down his victuals with something better than butter-milk.

Nothing could persuade him to stay a moment after he had finished. The rain was ceasing, and he had other things to do besides waiting about all day for ungrateful young hussies. She might walk to Dykelands on her ten toes.

Mr Lapworth sent his duty to Madam, and promised to send Honor up to the house on her reappearance. "Though whether Madam will choose to take her after behavin' to me in this way," said the bailiff with dignity, "is another pair of shoes, as the common people say."

Madam undoubtedly was much displeased, and would have said and done something in the matter but for the deplorable weakness of the Squire. Continually immersed in the study of heraldry, he never had the chance or the wish to do anything wrong, except in the way of over-eating himself, and from that danger his wife's continual watchfulness preserved him. Unfortunately upon that very day Madam was detained in the village by the arrival of the blacksmith's wife's baby, without any warning and long before its time, and the cook sent in a goose-pie for the Squire's dinner. Having for once a chance of enjoying himself whole-heartedly, the good man yielded to it. When Madam came home, late that night, worn out with a hand-to-hand fight with death, in which her coolness and common-sense gained the victory, she found retribution already fallen. The apothecary was fetched in haste, and Madam sat up with the Squire

all night. For several days he was so ill that she could spare no time to think of any one else. When convalescence was fairly established, no more having been heard of Honor, Madam concluded that the young woman had gone back to her own neighbourhood.

A small village boy on his way home from school, on the afternoon of Honor's disappearance from the farm, was stopped by Mrs South, who wanted to know whether he could read writing.

"Depends on the writing," was his cautious reply.

"'Tis somethin' I found on a parcel from the shop," explained Mrs South, displaying a scrap of brown paper. The boy spelled it through. "To pay for what I hev' ea-eaten and broken."

"You're sure that's all?"

He nodded, and ran off whistling in the middle of her explanation that she was no scholar, and didn't think right to throw away a bit of writing, in case it meant something.

When the pedlar came on his round next week Mrs South changed a guinea and bought herself a new petticoat, in spite of the fact that South had taken all her last month's wages to spend at the alehouse.

Isaac, with hoarse chuckles, counted over the notches on the tally, and thrust it into the kitchen fire on the evening of Honor's disappearance.

Mrs Lapworth was very restless for two or three nights. Her husband would have owned to no one that he left the door unfastened, and listened as he sat by his wife's bed for a step on the flags and a hand on the latch. The step never came; Honor had danced across their life as the Will-o'-the-Wisp danced across the ague-haunted meadows, without their knowing

whence she came or whither she went. Only in dreams before he woke at dawn, or in fancy as he came home in the dusk, did he still hear her sing—

“When shall we meet again?  
When the oaken leaves that fall from the trees  
Are green and spring again.”



## CHAPTER XIII.

WHILE the bailiff in the lane was wondering what could have come to the baggage, Honor was almost as uncomfortable as in his opinion such a graceless young maid deserved to be.

She started from the farm with no definite aim, except to keep away from the Petworth road. Having crossed the wood and the field where the child lay buried, she came out into a narrow lane which appeared to lead in the opposite direction, and wandered along it, trying to determine whither she should go.

This was different from the evening when she had escaped from Sir Charles, little more than a week ago. The blackberries, shrivelled or fly-blown, were nearly all fallen from the bushes; the day was past on which, according to West Country belief, the devil spits upon them and makes them unfit to eat. The honeysuckle, weighed down by cold rains, gave out no scent, and the odour hanging upon the damp air was that of a carrion fungus growing behind the hedge. Instead of speeding lightly along the road, she scarcely could drag her feet out of the heavy mire.

She had gone for about a mile when a big drop of rain dashed into her face, followed by another and

another. Overhead the sky was black all round, the wind made sudden rushes. She looked on all sides for shelter, and saw in the distance, sticking up like a gigantic pair of ears, the chimneys of a hop oast.

Before she could reach it the storm burst, and in a few minutes she was wet to the skin. Panting, worn out with the struggle against wind and rain, she could not have reached the oast had it been a score of yards further off; as it was, she fell against the door, which yielded to her weight, and dropped within the threshold.

The place was deserted and half ruinous. The rain and the wind came in through countless holes in the roof. Honor found a dry patch of floor in one corner and crouched there, her arms clasping her knees in a vain hope of keeping a little warmth in her body.

She was so tired that if it had not been for the cold she would have fallen asleep. As it was, the dampness of her clothes, and the puffs of wind that came through every crevice, effectually kept her awake to puzzle over the question of her next hiding-place. She could not hope to chance upon another farm where a girl was expected. Those who wanted servants would have found them at the hiring fair. Moreover, she knew that even if she could prevail upon some employer to take her, without a character and without clothes, she could not do the work usually expected of a farm servant. She felt worn out, her body ached from head to heel.

Rack her brain as she might, she could think of nothing that would help her. This was no longer a fairy-tale adventure; it was a part of human life in all its grimness.

Should she confess herself beaten? The farm was

only a little way off, and the rain was passing over. She might go back, and if the bailiff were not there, ask Mr Lapworth to take her to Dykelands. At least it must be warm in Madam's house; they would give her food to eat, dry clothes to put on, a bed on which she might lie down and close her eyes, and forget all her troubles, perhaps, for a few hours. But it would mean that she was once more at Sir Charles's mercy. "And I'd rather be at the bottom of the river than where he could touch me again," said Honor to herself, little guessing that the bottom of the river was exactly the place where her friends believed her to be at that moment.

Somehow, the thought of a river brought back memories of an afternoon in London when she went out in the carriage with Jane and the children's governess, Mrs Rivers being kept at home by a *migraine*. They drove to Hammersmith, Jane explaining that Mamma wished her to leave cards upon an old lady, living in the convent, whom she had known for many years. No, she was not exactly a nun, but she was a Papist. Mamma did not wish them to go into the convent; the cards were to be left at the gate. Jane had never been taken inside when her mother visited the old lady, as Mrs Rivers said that Papists always tried to kidnap young girls, but she believed it was a very old convent. Some one told her that it was founded by Catharine of Braganza, who was the wife of Charles II. ("Quite right, my dear Miss Rivers, I am glad to see that the gay world has not put your history out of your mind," from the governess.) What did they do in a convent? Jane really did not know. She supposed they worshipped the Pope; she knew that they cut off your hair if you became a nun, but not if you were only a

boarder; the old lady had plenty of hair. Jane did not think that all Papists could be wicked, as people said; when the old lady came to call in Brunswick Square, she often told them how kind the nuns were, and how much they did for the poor; they were very good to ladies staying at the convent who were ill or in trouble. It was very quiet there; very pleasant for the sad and the weary—and very cheap, for the nuns did not want to make money; they were not allowed to have any of their own. Jane thought it a pity that there could be no such place for Protestant ladies.

As she sat huddled against the wall, with eyes half-closed, Honor could hear Jane's placid voice flowing on, and see the river running away under a still grey sky.

The thought came to her that she might go to the convent and ask them to take her in. She had the guineas in her stays; they might last her until Jane was married to Mr Egerton, and she could be asked for help. She did not know the name of the convent, but she remembered that it was at Hammersmith, and Hammersmith was near London; she must get back to London.

The idea of a coach passed through her mind, only to be rejected; she was afraid to encounter the other passengers, and besides, the fare would swallow up too many of her guineas. She must walk, unless she could fall in with some kindly soul who would give her a lift, as some of the farmers near Witham would do for a tired wayfarer.

The rain ceased as she went out of the door, no longer a princess-errant, but a forlorn and dragged little waif, drifting she knew not where, like the yellow and brown oak-leaves which the wind was sweeping into rings at her feet.



Of what happened after this she never had any clear recollection. There were impressions of stumbling along the road, of leaving one shoe or the other in the mud, and having to pick it out, of climbing uphill until her breath was gone and there was a sharp pain in her side—whether it were a real hill, or one of the dream-range which most of us try to ascend at one time or another, she never knew. Then she was slipping down the other side, till her knees gave way, and then she found herself upon a tract of moor, with plovers mewing all round her.

She thought that she wandered over that moor during several days; it may have been several hours, for the next impression that came clearly upon her was that there were no more plovers to be seen, and the stars were coming out overhead. Not far away shone a light that seemed to be in the window of a house. She thought she would go there and ask for a night's lodging; she had forgotten that she ever wanted food. If she offered to pay for it, she might get leave to sleep in some out-building, supposing that they would not actually admit her into the house.

The house stood on a corner of the moor with a garden at the front and the back. All round it were tall laurel bushes from which the drops were falling heavily upon the sodden ground. A little wicket-gate at the back was unfastened; Honor went up the gravel path to the house. Once at the back door, she hesitated to knock. What sort of people were they who lived alone upon the moor? What reception would they give her? There was a mysterious sinister air about the house; all the lower windows were tightly shuttered; there was no sound from within. The light



which must have shone from a window of the upper storey had disappeared.

As she stood there, dreading alike to knock or to wait alone in the darkness and silence, she heard a man's step coming up the gravel path, and in a spasm of unreasoning terror, thrust herself into a great laurel bush that grew beside the door.

The newcomer stopped within a couple of yards of her, and began to whistle, at first softly, then louder. She could hear some one moving within the house, steps came along the passage, and the door opened.

From where she cowered, within her bush, Honor could see nothing, and she dared not make the least movement for fear of attracting attention. The person at the door was evidently a woman; she began to abuse the man for coming so late. He need not think she had waited for him; she had been doing a bit of cleaning in the house, and she was not going to let him in to muck about with his dirty boots. She had no time to stay there talking to him; she had to make up the fire, so that it would last till morning.

The man answered sulkily that he had been kept late at work and couldn't get away no sooner; was *he* in the house?

No, *he* had gone out when the rain stopped and was wandering about the place, staring himself silly at the stars.

More likely to be spying for the Frenchies. They were saying down village that it was time he was cleared out of the place, and it was not fit that any one should work for him—if he wasn't a spy, he was a conjurer.

To which the woman snappishly rejoined that she'd thank the village to mind their own business, and not

come interfering with a decent woman that was earning her own living. He paid better wages than any one around, and she had less to do for it, and no mistress to worry the life out of her. It was no affair of hers how he came by the money. Were they going home that night, or did William mean to keep her on the doorstep till morning?

William thought she might offer a man a mouthful of something to eat and drink, after coming all that way.

"I niver asked you to come, and there's nothin' fit for a Christian to eat. The old French woman was down here to-day, making her messes; she won't let me see what she puts in them, but 'tes sure to be frogs and snails and inwards. It's set ready for him by the fire, and there's not a drop of beer in the house."

In that case, William thought they might as well be going; when would he be coming back?

Not till daylight, very likely; she nearly always found him in bed when she came in the morning.

What did she do with the key? Why, she hid it, to be sure, in a place where nobody would ever think of looking for it.

The door shut with a bang, and then, to Honor's dismay, a great hand was thrust into the laurel. Nearer and nearer it came, till the fingers all but touched her face; she would have screamed if her throat had not been so dry that no sound could come from it. They had seen her and were going to drag her out of the bush. Then came a little scraping noise, and a clink, and the hand disappeared.

"I couldn't think where that nail had gotten to," said the woman's voice.

The steps went down the path, the little iron gate

clicked behind them. Honor strained her ears, but she could hear no more. They were gone, whoever they were, and she was safe.

She had gathered enough from their talk, in spite of the dialect, to realise that the house was empty until a certain mysterious "he" came home, that there was food and a fire within, and that the key hung on a nail on the wall close to her head. What should hinder her from going in, warming herself and drying her clothes? Out she crept, a pale and shivering little Daphne, her curls soaked with the drops from the laurel bush. The key turned easily in the lock. In a moment, she was standing in a little dark hall or lobby. The light coming in through the open door was enough to show her another door in front of her, and one on either hand.

She opened that at the right, and found herself in what was evidently the kitchen. A few embers were dying in the grate, the mice were holding high revels, as was apparent from scamperings and squeaks. Honor shuddered with disgust, and drew back. She tried the door to the left.

A rushlight set in a bowl of water showed her a little room hung round with coats, whips, sticks, and other masculine possessions. In one corner was a basin and a tap, close to a door that gaped ajar and let a glow of firelight through the crack. Very gently Honor stole across the floor, afraid that all might be a dream, afraid that some one might be lurking there beside the fire to pounce upon her, and crept into the inner room.

If it were a dream, it was not terrible or fantastic. The atmosphere of the fairy tales was coming round her once more.

The room was long and low, panelled with a dark wood that seemed to swallow up the rays of the fire, which, after all, the unknown woman had forgotten to make up before she went. That was all the better for Honor; instead of smouldering quietly beneath layers of coal-dust, it was burning merrily, the dancing flames seeming to laugh at her in encouragement. The same goblin faces that she used to see as a child sitting on Nurse's lap before the fire, were here to welcome her to this strange place.

At one end of the room stood a large carved chair before a heavy old-fashioned bureau covered with papers, and near it was a table covered with a thick brocade woven in some Eastern loom. No Western craftsman would have had the courage to throw together greens and blues and yellows and browns and oranges, so as to produce something that was not any of these colours, and that suggested deep water in sunlight. Another and smaller table was set near the fire, and on it was laid supper—a cold chicken, a loaf of bread, a salad mixed as only a Frenchman can mix it, a tall bottle of wine, and a silver jug.

At the sight of this Honor forgot everything except that her mouth was agape with thirst. She tilted the jug against a large dull green glass, poured, and drank, not caring what she drank. The liquor was cool and not unpleasing, with a clean bitter taste. Honor emptied the glass and poured again, amused like a child, to see the marigold petals floating on the top.

Already she was less cold, her head was clearer. Here was everything that she wanted; she would rest and dry her clothes. There would be plenty of time



before "he" arrived if he was not expected in the house until daylight; the big clock on the chimney-piece told her that it was only half-past seven.

What unspeakable relief it was to strip off the soaked gown and petticoat, the clumsy shoes and coarse stockings stiff with mud! Then, remembering the basin in the other room, she bathed face and hands, and came back refreshed. That what she was doing was little better than burglary, and that burglary at that time was a capital offence never occurred to her; it seemed quite natural to find this refuge in her need, and having found it, to take what she wanted.

The chicken looked tempting and she tried to eat, but found she could not swallow it; her throat was too sore. After all, she did not feel hungry. She emptied the silver jug.

"I hope the ogre will not be very thirsty when he comes back to his house," she thought, half laughing at herself, half in earnest.

Now, while her clothes were drying, she might rest before the fire. There were two cushions on one of the chairs, and she spread them in the blaze and lay down, to start up again in a few moments. It was chilly on the floor; she must have something to throw over her. The Eastern brocade offered itself to her hand, and was tucked over bare neck and arms and feet. Honor cuddled luxuriously beneath it, and watched the flames glittering upon the heavy brass fire-guard. The ache in limbs and head was growing less, the shivers of deadly cold were no longer running through her; she would soon be fit to take the road for London.

Her hand, pulling the cushion a little lower beneath her head, came in contact with something hard upon the floor. She held it up to the light; it was a neck-



lace, apparently, but such a necklace as she had never seen—a chaplet of little brown seeds with here and there a silver bead among them, and a silver medal hanging from it.

She was too sleepy to make out what was engraved upon the medal; her eyelids would keep apart no longer. The firelight hurt her eyes; there was no harm in closing them for a few moments. Of course she was not going to sleep for fear that the ogre might—come—home—

The curly head nestled down into the cushions, and Honor fell asleep.

## CHAPTER XIV.

SOME five miles from the lonely house among the rain-sodden laurels, along the road leading past the farther end of the heath, there was a stretch of ground that by comparison with its surroundings might be considered dry, a straggling fir-wood having sheltered it from most part of the storms.

About five o'clock on the afternoon of the day on which Honor left the farm, Lady Elystan was walking Selim up and down in the lee of the wood. It may have been that she chose it as the only place where she could be sure of not being bogged in the mud, or she may have had other reasons. The clay spattered over horse and rider showed that the road by which she came had been neither easy nor pleasant for riding.

After several turns up and down, she slipped from the horse's back and stood beside him, looking away across woods and fields to the west, where the clouds were parting for the sunset. No longer the reckless "belle Amazone" who teased Selim for the amusement of quieting his antics and plaguing Sir Charles, she might have been the heroine of one of the sentimental poems of the day, waiting for her lover, as she stood

there with one arm through the bridle and one hand caressing Selim's neck. No artist could have devised a more becoming pose, and yet, like every one of her attitudes, it seemed not the result of deliberate arrangement, but the most natural and most graceful expression of her feeling at the moment.

So thought the gentleman who came out of the wood at her back and stood watching her, apparently in no hurry to make his presence known. To judge by the deep lines in his olive face, and the grey threads in his unpowdered hair, he might be of any age from thirty to forty, while his slight supple figure was that of a much younger man. He wore the ordinary morning dress of an English country gentleman at that period, but with an air and a distinction that were most un-English.

Leaning against a tree-trunk, his arms folded, he surveyed Lady Elystan and thought, as he had often thought before, of the cruelty of those who married her at eighteen to a wretched hypochondriac, before she had developed into the most beautiful woman in London. If allowed to wait for a few years, she might have found a more suitable husband, one way or the other, than old Lord Elystan; she might have been a happy woman or a very great lady, perhaps both. As it was, there could be little wonder if she amused herself with any man who took her fancy, from wits and Cabinet Ministers down to a good-looking oaf, such as Sir Charles Mendip.

Selim suddenly threw up his head and sniffed impatiently; his mistress turned, and saw Claud Fenwick standing behind her.

"I was waiting for you. I thought you might come by this way."

She spoke simply, directly, without a touch of coquetry or of the mockery that she used with other men.

"It is fortunate that my hair is grey or my head might be turned. To hear that a beautiful lady—though she is my cousin—has done me the honour to wait for my passing——"

Lady Elystan interrupted him, speaking sharply—

"Have you time to spare? Are you on your way to any appointment?"

"I have no appointment except with the stars, and they, like myself, can wait your ladyship's pleasure. I was on the way to my observatory, as usual."

Without another word, she turned and walked slowly into a little clearing in the wood, leading Selim with her. Following her, he thought idly how perfect was every little detail, the turn of the hand that held up the skirt of her riding-habit, the droop of the long feather over the coils of hair.

She sat down upon a fallen tree-trunk. He stood beside her, taking no notice of the gesture that invited him to sit. Selim, with a gentlemanly air of resignation to the dulness of his surroundings, cropped at the tufts of grass round her feet.

For once in her life, Lady Elystan seemed to have difficulty in finding words. She played with her riding-whip for some minutes before saying abruptly—

"We go back to town to-morrow."

"So soon? That is unexpected; I thought you were settled in the country till the New Year."

"My lord has changed his mind; he means to spend the winter in St James's Square. He cannot endure the attentions of the aborigines. Young and old, fat and lean, ill and well, they all come to leave their



tickets and to inquire after his health, and the draughts caused by the constant opening and shutting of the front door brought on a catarrh which might have affected his lungs. He gave orders that intending callers should be stopped at the lodge, but this only made matters worse. They were sure that there must be something interesting and mysterious at the house—either he had set up a seraglio, or I must have grown a beard—and they swarmed in by the back way till there were twenty draughts instead of ten. So he is sick of the country.”

She kept her eyes fixed on her cousin's face while she spoke, and saw that it expressed nothing beyond half-contemptuous amusement.

“I congratulate you on escaping so soon from your *villeggiatura*.”

Then he did not know the real reason why the neighbours thronged to make inquiries for Lord Elystan. She drew a quick breath of relief.

“There are advantages in obscurity and bad reputation,” said Fenwick indifferently. “I am not troubled by tickets or visitors at any hour. No one crosses my threshold except the woman from the village who comes in every day to clean and cook, and she has found out at last that it is useless to talk to me.”

“Her cooking has not poisoned you yet?”

“No; so long as she keeps to what she can do it is not uneatable. Besides, I am not altogether dependent upon her; there is a dear old lady living in a room near the convent who was in the service of the Reverend Mother's family, and came over to England with the nuns and has never left them, though she will take no vows. She knew some of my mother's relations, and is very kind to me for their sake. Whenever she

has a little time to spare and is not too rheumatic for the walk, she comes over to the house and cooks some dainties for me. I believe she is busy there at this moment; she told me that I had *l'air affamé*, and that she intended to make me a nourishing bouillon and a tisane that would invigorate the brain."

There was silence again until Lady Elystan asked, with eyes fixed upon a purple scabious growing at her feet—

"Did you know that old Harbord was dead?"

"I heard it this morning from his lawyer."

The beautiful face looked up, aglow with excitement. "Then he has left you——"

"Five pounds to buy a mourning ring."

"The devil take the canting, miserly old Methodist!"

Lady Elystan's maxim, on which she usually acted, was that strong emotion of any kind was not worth the premature wrinkles which it would trace round eyes and mouth. Few of her acquaintances would have recognised her even tones in the voice thrilling with indignation.

Fenwick's long fine hand was held up to check her. "It was his own money. He had a right to leave it to whom he pleased."

"He promised to make you his heir."

"When he thought me worthy of the position. He saw reason to change his mind."

"Old fool!" muttered Lady Elystan between her teeth.

"And as you very well know, most of my friends agreed with him."

"They did not! You chose to think that they did."

"Can you deny that a year ago, when I came back to London, I suddenly found myself given the cold

shoulder wherever I went, because I was supposed to have contrived Champneys's arrest?"

"You would not explain——"

"One does not explain in such a case," he said, with a look and a movement of the head that made Lady Elystan ejaculate, "*Le voilà!* your illustrious cousin the Marquis must have looked like that when they brought him before the Revolutionary Tribunal."

"And the Tribunal was kinder to him than public opinion has been to me; they took his estates, his money, his friends, and his head. I have lost everything except my head."

"And for all the use you make of it, it might as well have rolled into the basket with your cousin's. Claud, listen to me; your friends have not been taken from you. Come to Town with us to-morrow."

"To endure the stares and the whispers and the innuendoes once more? Or is there hope that some one might condescend to a meeting with a spy? If so, a bullet may do the business for me as well as the guillotine did it for the Marquis."

"Don't be absurd! As if any one had thought of you for at least ten months! we have had fifty other scandals, all vastly more distressing, since you disappeared. If you were to come back to-morrow, you would be asked what had kept you away."

For once, Lady Elystan's skill in dealing with men forsook her, when she was most anxious to succeed; the least conceited man on earth does not like to hear that his friends have found something to think of, more interesting than his real or imaginary crimes. She was quick to note the set of his mouth, and hurried on, hoping to efface the slip.

"My lord has interest, when he can be stirred up to

use it. He could get you a good place under Government. If you would agree to go abroad for a year or two, it could be managed easily. There is something that Lady Maria Vane wanted for her grandson, Mr Egerton, but he can speak no language but his own, and his flute-playing was no recommendation, although it is most gentlemanlike and out of tune. In one way and another, it would not take you long to lay by enough to be able to live at Guesthwaite when you came home."

He interrupted her decisively.

"Guesthwaite was sold six months ago."

"Sold?" she echoed blankly.

"Sold to the tenant. I knew that I should never afford to live there again."

"And it had been in your family for generations."

"Yes. We kept it in spite of fines and sequestrations and imprisonments, so long as we held to the old faith, though the lands dwindled with every generation. My father was tired of finding himself shut out from everything, hampered at every turn, because he worshipped as all England used to worship, and made up his mind that his son should not be fettered. When I was born he conformed."

"But your mother was a Catholic?"

"She came of a family where it was always understood that religion was for women. So I was the first Protestant to inherit Guesthwaite, and I have not kept it long."

"Forget about it—you will buy it back some day. After all, it was a grim old place, and out of the world. Begin again. Come up to London with us to-morrow, instead of dawdling away your time here in idleness."



"You think a tame astronomer would be an addition to your menagerie, even though he is under a cloud? But there is no need of your kind patronage to find me occupation, now that my landlord has given me leave to use the old tower his brother built——"

"They have changed its name to Fenwick's Folly instead of Branwell's Folly," she finished for him, in her coolest and most insolent tone.

He replied with a little bow, a shrug of the shoulders, and outspread hands, as if deprecating her wrath while he inflamed it by the suggestion of a mocking smile twisting the corners of his mouth.

"What are you going to do?" It was the same question that she had put to Sir Charles, and the recollection brought a flush to her cheeks.

"When I take leave of you, I shall go on to Fenwick's Folly. I shall probably return home by daylight. I shall eat the excellent supper Mme. Barbeau will have left for me; then I shall go to bed and sleep till noon."

"And after that?"

"After that, I shall dress, breakfast, and go for a walk."

"And you will continue this existence until you die of old age?"

"I cannot say; I fear I may scarcely be left so long in peace. The friendly and intelligent rustics have made up their minds that I am a wizard or a Frenchman—they are not sure which, but in order that there may be no doubt about their sentiments, they intend to burn my effigy on Guy Fawkes' night. If the bonfire is a success, they may choose my house or myself as the subject of their next experiment."

"Let us have done with nonsense," said Lady Elystan coldly, pulling off her glove to rub Selim's nose, which was thrust into her hand in an entreaty to keep him waiting no longer. "You know that you cannot go on living among barbarians, sinking to their level, shut off from your friends."

"I repeat that I have no friends left."

"Shut off from your own class, from those who are asking to be your friends, if you would not hold them off."

"*Ma chère cousine*, I have sunk below the rustic level already, as you see. I have shown myself an ungrateful brute; but you must forgive a broken man for being peevish."

"Broken, indeed? Why let any one break you? You are young enough and clever enough to begin again and make your way in the world. If I were a man I would not sit down at two-and-thirty and pretend that I could not get up again."

"And suppose that your world was in ruins?"

"What would that matter, so long as I were strong enough to struggle from under the ruins?"

"*Si fractus illabitur orbis impavidum ferient ruinæ*, as we used to say at school. But there are some fragments that cannot be put together, even by your skilful hands."

"If you mean that little fool, Charlotte Winslow, there is no time to be wasted in mending a china toy. Sweep up the pieces and throw them out on the dust-heap."

He bowed again, not in mockery this time, but with an air that made her silent for a moment.

"It is getting dark," he said after a pause, "and

you have no groom with you. May I suggest that it would be wiser to let me put you on Selim, and to ride home?"

"You are making a fatal mistake," she urged. "You are not a mummy or a monk; you are a man, and flesh and blood will have its way. Some day you will want a woman—and where will you find her? Do you think you can settle down for life with some rustic beauty—the parson's daughter or the farmer's? Can you see yourself living with her when she has grown fat and scarlet-faced, and has brought you six daughters with long legs and purple elbows?"

"To avoid such a consummation, I might imitate many a better man and marry my cook when I feel unable to do without female companionship; Mme. Barbeau, at least, could be trusted to feed me well. Her omelettes are perfection; and at her age there would be no reason for you to distress yourself about other consequences."

"Good-evening, Mr Fenwick," said Lady Elystan, rising to her feet, cold and dignified. "No, thanks, I can mount from here without your help."

Nevertheless she made no further protest when he bent down and took her foot into his hand.

"No one ever mounted me as well as you do," she said, almost wistfully, when she was in the saddle.

"We had some good rides together, before I grew old—*Adieu, chère et belle*; forgive me if you can. If I choose to go my own way, it is not that I am ungrateful to a very generous kinswoman."

He bent down and kissed her hand before giving her the reins.

Selim, impatient to be off, was checked in the middle of a curvet that his lady might turn round and ask—

“Who gets old Harbord’s money?”

“His wife, for her life; after her, the Bible Society.”

“A creature like that shows what an intolerably *bourgeois* habit it is to read the Bible,” were Lady Elystan’s parting words as Selim cantered away over the heath.

She went home, mortified and disappointed, though she could not have defined how far her regrets were for her cousin and how far for herself. As an ugly unwanted child, neglected and repressed, her only pleasure came from the big cousin who alternately petted and teased her. Now that she was admittedly an influence in her world, she had it in her power to make the fortune of almost any man. If she chose to work for Claud, she knew that the stories against him would be forgotten or disregarded.

It was the more provoking that he should reject the hand held out to him, since he was clever enough to climb far when once his feet were set upon the ladder.

Fenwick, standing bareheaded to watch her out of sight, felt a sudden qualm of repentance before she disappeared; he made a step forward, as if to run after her, then drew back. Since justice was denied him, he would accept no one’s kindness.

Her pride had kept her from telling him frankly that she needed his help. The scandal caused by Sir Charles’s passing his wedding-night at Elystan Court, while his wife was drowned through his servants’



carelessness, was rising to such a height that she craved for advice and support from the only kinsman for whom she knew any respect. At the word, Fenwick would have gone to London with her. But she was too proud to say the word, and he too proud to go without it, and neither guessed that the destinies of both were fixed when he let her ride alone into the dusk that afternoon.

## CHAPTER XV.

"No use to waste time here any longer on a night like this. *Diantre!* What a climate they have in Sussex."

Accustomed to talk both in English and in French ever since he had the power of speech, Claud Fenwick's thoughts passed indifferently from the one language to the other. That, when he gave himself the pleasure of swearing, it was usually in French, was one of the indications proving him to be a spy in the minds of his acquaintances.

He was locking up the door of "the Folly" before going home. Though the night was fine, a mist began to creep up soon after his arrival, preventing any stargazing, and he could not force himself to do any of the other work that lay ready to his hand. Though he took up a pen to work out some calculations, he sat twisting it between his fingers, or scratching little sketches of a woman in riding-dress, a tall woman, who rode away across the heath and out of his life.

He felt that he was fool as well as churl to let her go, and yet he spoke no more than the truth when he told her that his world was in ruins, and he could not build it up again.

His father had counted for very little in his life. Mr Fenwick, a soured and disappointed man, began by attributing all the misfortunes and inconveniences of his own youth to having been reared in the faith of his fathers, and as English law then stood he had some just grounds for the belief. After the birth of a son decided him to conform to the Established Church, he expected a full tide of prosperity, and was half-annoyed, half-frightened to discover that externally everything remained very much as it used to be. The sudden death of the French wife who had accepted his apostacy with a careless shrug of her shoulders—"What would you have? They are made *comme ça*, these men!"—confirmed his dread that Heaven was set against him. He shut himself up in his rooms at Guesthwaite, seeing little of the boy for whose sake he believed he had damned his soul. He was too proud to seek reconciliation to his old faith, or rather, he put off doing it from time to time, until death surprised him on a night when snow lay thick over the fells and the priest could not be brought from Kendal.

Claud's chief friend and consoler, after the loss of his mother, was the wrinkled, snuffy old gentleman in the round wig and puce-coloured coat, who came one day to Sedbergh School to ask for him, and carried him off to a big house near Enfield. That house henceforth was Claud's home in the holidays, before and after his father's death. He was sent to Eton and to Cambridge, and, as he grew older, developed scientific tastes that were the delight of Mr Harbord.

Some of his relations were scandalised. Science was all very well for a snuffy old quiz, but it was not the thing for a young gentleman of good family; they supposed that he made pretence with it in order to

keep on the right side of old Harbord. Others, like Mrs Harbord, were shocked at his consorting with French *émigrés*, and could not see that his mother was any excuse for it. By her death she had made the only atonement in her power for being a Frenchwoman and a Papist, and the less said of her the better.

Claud knew from the first that Mrs Harbord disliked him, and troubled very little about it except to avoid her as far as possible. He never understood what was involved until he returned from a long absence at Guesthwaite to find Mr Harbord feeble and almost childish in consequence of a severe illness, and completely under the thumb of the narrow-minded, underbred woman who up to this time had not been allowed to meddle in anything beyond her house-keeping. Even then, it was a paralysing shock to Claud to find her accusing him of the betrayal of Mr Champneys to the French police.

That she should say such a thing was natural; that she should believe it was quite possible. Women of her type make it almost a religious duty to believe ill of those in any way superior to themselves, especially if there should be any tie of kindred or affinity between them. He could afford to laugh at it; no one would listen to her. Although Champneys and he had nothing in common except a great-grandfather, and either jarred upon the other whenever they came together, no rational human being could believe that Fenwick wanted to put him out of the way. He said this to himself, feeling the while that no one who knew him would believe him capable of such a dirty trick, whether he wished to rid himself of his cousin or not. He would have laughed at the suggestion that Mrs Harbord could make her hus-



band believe it, until he saw the poor old man sitting huddled in his arm-chair, picking at his lips with a tremulous hand and refusing to answer his appeal by word or look.

It was true, as Lady Elystan said, that Claud Fenwick was both Englishman and Frenchman, and that the side which he turned at a crisis was usually not the side most likely to serve his interests. The dour North Country blood was working in him when he left the house without attempting explanation or contradiction, and it kept him from making the first move to a reconciliation until it was too late.

He told himself, from the day of their parting, that all hope was gone of being his cousin's heir, and that he would never be able to live at Guesthwaite, or to carry on the researches of which he and Mr Harbord often talked together. He did not know that hope was not driven out, but lurking in a corner, until the lawyer's letter came.

The bitterest pang of all was not for blighted prospects and years wasted in attendance upon an old man. It was for the friend and companion who had gone into the unknown believing the worst of him.

"And I never thanked him for what he did for me," mused Claud, tramping over the heath.

Charlotte Winslow was almost forgotten. For a time he admired her, idealised her, as a very clever man often will idealise a silly woman. Luckier than some clever men, he began to find out the real woman before he had fallen deeply in love with her.

If anything could make the whole bewildering story more like a fantastic nightmare, it was that he should

be supposed to have betrayed poor old Champneys for the love of Charlotte.

Well, it was useless to cry over spilt milk. He must put Guesthwaite and Enfield out of his mind from this time forth. (There was that little copse by the waterfall, where his mother used to gather mealy primroses; would the new owner cut down all the trees and leave the force bare to the sun?) He must think of something else.

Again he tried to fix his mind upon his calculations, and again he failed. The mist was all round him. He remembered how the mists used to roll down the hills at Guesthwaite, and how once as a boy, hunting for a raven's nest, he lost the track and, unable to see a step in front of him, wandered to the very edge of a cliff—a slip of the foot sent a loose stone spinning over, to crash down upon the heap of shale far below. But for that slip he might have stepped over the edge. If the fall had killed him at once it would have been the best thing for him; but you never know how long you might lie among the crags with broken bones, like a moribund sheep, the ravens watching you. Did the same pair of ravens still build their nest above the cleft where the parsley fern hung, cool and green and damp?

He must not think of Guesthwaite. What else was there to think of? There was his cousin. She called Guesthwaite “a grim old place.” It was very different from her white-and-gold drawing-room in St James's Square, and yet it would have set off her beauty after its fashion.

It was strange that he had never fallen in love with his cousin; no other woman was to be compared with her. But when first he knew her she was a pale-faced

child, with long legs and thin arms; they did not meet, after she passed out of childhood, until she was the wife of Lord Elystan.

Every year since then added to her beauty. He never knew it greater than when she pleaded with him that afternoon. Her voice was never shrill, never strained; a blind man might fall in love with her for that alone.

"The time will come when you will want a woman." He could hear her say the words, and stopped dead with the shock of the thought that followed. The time was come already. Claud suddenly knew that the dull aching and the dumb longing were not alone for lost friend or for lost home. Exiled for more than a year from his kind, he was craving—not for the woman, but for a woman. He thought of the ladies whom he used to meet in Lady Elystan's drawing-room, with their silken robes and gleaming jewels; he could hear the sound of their laughter, he could smell the cloud of scent and powder that hung about them.

No, it was useless to think of them. He walked on faster in the darkness. He had cut himself off from all hope of marriage in his own class. There was nothing left for him, as Lady Elystan foretold, but the parson's bouncing daughter.

Two figures, man and woman, came out of the mist towards him and vanished into the mist again. As they passed, almost touching him, he recognised the woman who did the work of his house, and a groom from the Manor. The man's arm was round her plump waist; she was giggling, but making no attempt at escape.

There were other women besides the parson's

daughter, women who would be satisfied with less than the ring. Why not? If a man could not afford to buy a lady—and marriage, as he had seen it, was generally a matter of buying and selling,—he must put up with something cheaper and less exacting.

He was nearly at home by this time; though the mists hid it, he knew that the house was not a quarter of a mile away. Why was he such a fool as to come back to darkness and silence, and such meagre comfort as that slatternly wench might leave for him, when he could have some one waiting for his return, some one who would make it her business to have everything as he liked it?

Only Methodists and such cattle took life seriously. It was a farce, a dance. The only question that really mattered was whether you could succeed in making other people dance to your tune.

What was that running in his ears?—

*“Sur le pont d’Avignon, on y danse, on y danse.”*

He remembered how, long ago, his mother used to sing and dance for him; he could see her little red-heeled shoes moving under her skirt, as she mimicked the passers on the bridge of Avignon:—

*“Les capucins font comme ça;  
Et puis encore comme ça.”*

“You are not a mummy or a monk,” his cousin had told him.

*“Sur le pont d’Avignon, tout le monde y danse, en ronde.”*

He was tired of dancing by himself; he would find a partner, one that he could dismiss as soon as he was tired of her.

Of course he would never have brought such a



woman to the home where his mother had reigned. But Guesthwaite was lost, and here in Sussex there was no home, no holy place to be defiled.

His mother used to dance to him in the evenings before his father came in, and the diamond buckles on her shoes used to twinkle red and blue and green in the firelight. After his father's death, he found them in her dressing-case, wrapped up in a piece of paper on which was written, in her hand, "For my Son's wife." No one would wear those buckles again.

*"Les belles dames font comme ça—  
Sur le pont d'Avignon."*

And yet, if fate, that had treated him so unkindly, would relent and send him such a wife as his mother intended, not a fine lady to be bought, but a true woman to give? Long ago, when newly promoted to breeches, he remembered how his father found him kneeling on the floor of his mother's dressing-room and lisping a rhyming prayer to "Bonne Vierge Marie," because he wanted a horse for his birthday, not a hobby-horse, but a real horse with four legs and a mane and a tail. His father had said he was too old to say baby prayers in French, and gave him a book of Common Prayer. So far as Claud discovered, it never prayed for anything you really wanted, so he did not trouble to use it, except under compulsion and in church; but he left off saying the little rhyme to "Bonne Vierge Marie," because his father said it was babyish.

Nevertheless, there was a pony on his next birthday.

It would be his birthday to-morrow; should he ask "Bonne Vierge Marie" to send him a wife to wear his mother's buckles?

What folly! a poor man, disgraced and half an alien, he might as well ask her to turn those dismal laurels dripping all round him into the Scotch firs on the hill above Guesthwaite.

*"Nous n'irons plus aux bois  
Les lauriers sont coupés."*

It was strange how these snatches of song kept running in his head. He wished those laurels were cut down.

He strode up the path and into the house. That girl had left the door open. She was as careless as she was stupid; he must get rid of her. She was in such haste to meet the Manor groom that she left the house at the mercy of any tramp.

In the little anteroom the rushlight was flickering. A strange feeling came over him that he also was on his way to a tryst, that some one was waiting for him. He swore at himself for an imbecile, he whistled carelessly while he took off coat and boots, but the very tune which came to his lips was that of an old French song, and it seemed as though some one were singing the words in his ear:—

*"Derrière, chez mon père,  
Il est un bois taillis ;  
Le rossignol y chante  
Et le jour et la nuit."*

He flung the door of the parlour open, furious because he could not shake off the fancy that some one waited for him on its other side:—

*"Il chante pour les filles  
Qui n'ont pas d'ami."*

The fire was burning very low. Peste! the jade had forgotten to build it up before she went.

He thrust the table to one side. A piece of wood fell and flared high, gleaming upon the covered saucepan with the bouillon of Mme. Barbeau, at the side of the grate, on a heap of mud-stained garments in the corner, and upon something that glimmered blue in front of the fireplace.

“Il ne chante pas pour moi.”

It was the brocade that his grandfather brought from Persia, and it covered his visitor.

She lay there, one small brown foot thrust from under the shimmering silk, which left bare her neck and arms. The firelight showed the vivid curls, the slender neck, the pale cheeks to which sleep had brought no flush, and wound about hand and arm, the brown chaplet.

“Il ne chante pas pour moi—  
J'en ai un, Dieu merci.”





## PART II.



## CHAPTER XVI.

MME. BARBEAU had finished dressing, and was about to go out and feed her chickens, early next morning, when she missed her chaplet.

Where was it? Not hanging on the nail over her bed, nor in any of her pockets. Madame's nut-brown forehead puckered into countless wrinkles as she considered the problem. When did she use it last? Did she say her rosary before getting into bed?

No, she remembered clearly now; Monsieur Claud's tisane took an eternity in the making, and she pulled her beads out of her pocket and said two decades while she was waiting, so as not to waste time. Just as she came to her last Gloria Patri the tisane began to boil, and she lifted the saucepan off the fire and put it into a basin of cold water, that it might cool the faster.

If the beads were left in M. Claud's house there was a chance that she might find them again if that hussy, his *bonne*, were not beforehand with her. She would go down there as soon as the fowls were fed. She might meet M. Claud coming home. He kept shocking hours, that poor man, and if he were already in bed she knew where to find the key. She hoped she would meet M. Claud; he owed her something for what she had cooked for him last night and the week before.

For good Mme. Barbeau's ministrations to Claud were by no means disinterested, though they were not entirely selfish.

It was nearly forty years since, as a fine healthy young woman, she was chosen for *nourrice* to Mme. la Marquise's first baby, and neither of her own strapping boys was ever so dear to her as this delicate girl. Contrary to all predictions of doctors and neighbours, "notre demoiselle" lived to grow up, and when she insisted on entering the convent founded seven hundred years before her time by a member of her family, Mme. Barbeau, with many grumblings at the whimsies of "la jeunesse," went to live in a cottage at the gate. When the nuns fled to England, at the outbreak of the Revolution, Mme. Barbeau went with them, and found another little cottage close to their new home.

"Notre demoiselle" was now the Reverend Mother, with all the cares of the community upon her shoulders. The English benefactor who gave them a house on his property on their arrival, and maintained them for nearly fourteen years, was dead, and his heir at the Manor did not find it possible to continue his support upon the same scale. It was easy for the nuns to keep the fasts of the Church, but keeping the feasts was now another matter. When a festival was at hand, and the convent larder empty, Mme. Barbeau would be seized with a sudden anxiety for M. Claud's health and insist upon cooking for him. What with a penny here and a halfpenny there added to the price of the materials, and the *douceur* which M. Claud bestowed upon her, Mme. Barbeau made something to eke out the convent rations. It was a great deal of trouble for a very pitiful sum, but as she herself said, "The little brooks make the big rivers." As for conscientious



scruples, she considered that she was doing a good work twice over, since M. Claud was a heretic, and it might avail him some day that his money had gone to help the good sisters. For the matter of that, he already gave to them of his own free will, so that he could have no possible objection to giving a little more under Mme. Barbeau's management.

In her way the good woman was attached to Claud; he spoke French, which was an unspeakable comfort to poor souls in a barbarous place where no one had the wits to understand you. In spite of fifteen years in England, Mme. Barbeau had not demeaned herself to learn English; as soon would she have laid aside her short grey skirt, blue apron, and large white cap with its finely embroidered crown, for the dress of the village matrons.

The key of the lonely house was not hanging behind the laurel bush as usual. Then that animal must have come early, out of sheer perversity and wickedness, and the chaplet would be in her pocket at this moment. No use to tax her with it; she would deny everything, deny that she had fingers to pick it up, or a pocket to put it in, the viper. But, all the same, Mme. Barbeau was going to ask her whether she had seen the chaplet, just to show that she was not to be deceived.

In she stumped, composing in her mind the most witty sarcasms, which, as they needs must be delivered in French, were not likely to have all the effect that could be wished upon the delinquent, when M. Claud himself "sprang at her from behind the door like a wolf," as she mentally phrased it; the good lady, albeit one of the toughest of sheep, was so startled that she gave a shrill scream.

"Madame Barbeau! *A la bonheur!*"

"Pardon, Monsieur," gasped the visitor. "I did not know Monsieur would be here. When I was cooking for him last night——"

"I have been looking out, this hour, hoping that some one would pass. I never thought to see anything so good as your white cap."

"Monsieur flatters an old woman. Once, it is true, I was worth looking at, but what is beauty? A flower that withers as soon as it expands, as Sœur Amélie says—though she cannot speak from her own knowledge, having been of a truly remarkable ugliness all her life. But Monsieur knows that those who are not good enough for men are always given to *le bon Dieu*, just as, if there are rotten apples in the orchard at the Manor, they always find their way into the sack for the convent."

"You are not afraid of sickness, Mme. Barbeau?"

"Why should I be afraid? Does Monsieur think that I should not be eating apples at my age? *Tenez*, I have all my teeth but one, and that broke thirty years ago, at the fête for the birth of the son and heir to M. le Marquis. M. le Marquis himself cut the cake and brought me a slice, and I bit into it, and there is a crack enough to split my head—the imbecile of a cook had never sifted the flour, and my poor tooth was broken on a little stone."

"I mean, you would not be afraid of going near any one who was ill?"

"That depends," returned Mme. Barbeau, somewhat huffed at being cut short in a story that she loved to tell with every detail. "I prefer my fellow-creatures when they are in good health. I have taken no vow to nurse every one who comes to me, ill or pretending to be ill, like the poor good sisters. Not that they

have any one to nurse in these days, which is indeed fortunate, since there is not so much in the larder as you could put into your eye, and those who have anything to give seem to have forgotten the convent."

"There is a—a young lady here, who is very ill."

"Here?" The shrill voice grew shriller. "In Monsieur's house?"

"In Monsieur's parlour, as you will see if you will go in and stay with her while I go up to the convent."

"Monsieur must hold me excused," said Mme. Barbeau, her shapeless figure suddenly becoming rigid. "If he chooses to have such under his roof it is his own affair, but I have nothing to do with it, seeing that I came up to fetch my chaplet, which I dropped last night; I do not imagine that Monsieur and the—the demoiselle have been saying the rosary."

"You old fool, will you listen to me?" cried Fenwick, driven beyond his patience. "You are absolutely wrong. The young lady was going up to the convent, and was too ill to go any farther. I have been looking out ever since the dawn for some one to stay with her, while I went to ask the Reverend Mother to receive her, and I thought you would have sufficient humanity for that, especially if you are paid for it."

"Enough, Monsieur! No good Christian would ask payment for a service to a fellow-creature, and for the matter of that, we are all sinners," returned Mme. Barbeau with dignity, and, truth to tell, much impressed by seeing M. Claud lose his temper. "I am at Monsieur's service, as he knows, and if the fowls stray and the room is not swept, and I have not time to wash my cap for the Mass to-morrow, after all I have the knowledge of doing right, and a clean conscience is worth more than clean linen."

Fenwick's reply to this noble sentiment was a curt—"Then come in softly; she may be asleep."

The shutters in the parlour were thrown back, and the chill light of morning struggled in upon an improvised couch of pillows and rugs on which the wanderer lay, the Persian brocade still thrown over her.

"*Hein*—a young lady? She is no more than a child," commented Mme. Barbeau standing over the sleeper. "How does she come straying about alone?"

"What is the matter with her, do you think?" asked Claud, helpless as most men in the face of illness, and driven to rely upon Mme. Barbeau in spite of her not very sympathetic attitude. "I tried to make her eat, but she said it hurt her throat; she swallowed a little of your bouillon, though she would not touch any wine; she has more colour—surely that is a good sign? When I first saw her she was as white as a pocket-handkerchief." His English blood stopped him from saying "as white as a lily," which was what came to his tongue.

"She is as red as a tomato now; she has fever," said Mme. Barbeau decidedly, "she is breathing strangely. No doubt it is her lungs. I remember when Mme. the late Marquise——"

Honor stirred on her pillows with a little moan.

"My side! It hurts me!" Her eyes opened gradually, and turned from Claud to Mme. Barbeau. "A nun—the convent——"

"Mme. Barbeau has come to take care of you while I go to the convent. I will come back soon and take you there."

She smiled up in the face of Mme. Barbeau, who was kneeling by her side rearranging the pillows.



"Thank you very much. I have money, I can pay——" The voice died away, and the heavy eyelids fell once more.

Although Mme. Barbeau professed to know no English, she understood the meaning of the verb "to pay."

"Monsieur had better go up to the convent," she said briskly, "and see what the Reverend Mother will do for *la pauvrete*. I will stay till he returns. He must bring something to carry her, for she will never be able to walk."

"You think it will be safe for me to leave her?"

"What could Monsieur do if he stayed? He is neither priest nor doctor, and unless something is done for the demoiselle very soon, she will have no need of any one but the priest."

"Be sure to let no one in till I return, not even Polly," was Claud's last injunction as the door closed behind him.

Mme. Barbeau snorted. "Is it likely that she would be here for another two hours? My fine lady likes her bed of a morning, Monsieur! No use to call him. Why, he is in such haste, he has gone in his slippers. His feet will be sore before he gets to the convent. Lucky for him that *la Mère* is in bed with rheumatism, and that he will see Sœur Amélie, who is imbecile enough to believe any tale that a man tells her—she has heard few enough, having been so ugly that her family were bound to make a saint of her."

The old woman began to tidy the room, keeping up a muttered commentary all the while. "What is here? Mademoiselle's skirt, it would seem. *Fi donc!* it is so covered with mud that no one could say of what it is made. And her shoes? I would give a good deal

to know how M. Claud will explain that a demoiselle is found in the mud all alone, wearing such a skirt, and such shoes and stockings. Well, we will make them into a neat little bundle—so—no need for Mdlle. Pollee to find them. What is that?"—catching up something that lay on the edge of the brocade—"My chaplet."

Mme. Barbeau regarded the beads thoughtfully, and her shrewd face puckered with amusement.

"It would seem, after all, that Monsieur and his demoiselle were saying the rosary together," she chuckled. "I apologise. Now let us see if there is any coffee in the cupboard. Monsieur will want his breakfast when he returns, as he has eaten no supper."

Before the coffee was simmering over the fire Fenwick's long legs had carried him up to the convent gate. As he pulled the little rusty bell he wondered whether he were awake or dreaming. After the wild thoughts that were surging through his brain on the walk home from "the Folly," it was a stupefying surprise to find what waited for him in the firelight.

From the first moment when he set eyes upon her he felt that that was the lady of his dream. He knew not whence she came, he knew not how she came there, he only knew her for the bride who should dance in the diamond buckles. Like the Prince beside the Princess in the wild-rose wood, he knelt down before her and looked into the sleeping face.

How long he knelt he could not tell, before he bent down and kissed the pale cheeks.

Honor was dreaming of the dead father whom she knew only through the description of the two old women who loved him, and when she opened her eyes

to see a tall dark man bending over her, she took him for Adrian Basset.

"Oh, you have come," she whispered, holding out both her hands; "I was so lonely, so frightened."

Claud took the hands in his. "There is nothing to fear; you are safe. I will take care of you." Were these banal words all he could find for the lady of his love? he asked himself. His heart was beating so wildly that he could scarcely speak.

"They are dead—all dead—Miss Lester died long ago, and Nurse must be dead by now—she was ill and very old. There was nowhere for me to go, and they would not let me stay with Jane, or at the farm. It was cold and wet, and I was so tired."

"You shall stay here, by the fire—I will bring you food and wine. Lie still and rest."

"If you are here I shall be safe. I used to envy the girls who had fathers. I thought I had none. I wanted to get to the convent. Jane said that ladies might go and stay there, when they were ill, or sad, or very tired."

"The convent is not far from here. I will take you to it in the morning."

"I thought it was far away at Hammersmith. I walked, a long, long journey, and the mud was very deep, and I was cold."

He chafed her hands tenderly. "What is your name?"

She laughed as if at a joke. "Honor Lester. Could you not guess that?"

Then came a violent fit of shivering, which inspired Claud, still dizzy and half-stunned, to heap more wood on the fire, and to collect pillows and coverings from the other rooms.

She allowed him to build her a nest in the warmest corner, and appeared to be in less discomfort when she was settled within it. All his persuasions could not bring her to touch food or wine, and though he warmed the bouillon, he was not able to coax more than a spoonful of it down her throat. She lay among the pillows, half-asleep, sometimes moaning, sometimes breathing heavily, and Claud watched her with growing fear, wondering whether he should leave her to fetch help, or wait until Polly's arrival. He had just made up his mind to lock the house door, put the key in his pocket and run at full speed to the convent, when he heard Mme. Barbeau's step in the lobby.

He pulled again at the convent bell and heard it jangle gradually into silence, before any other sound broke the hush. Visitors never came to the house of the Bienheureuse Elisabeth from one week's end to another in these days, and the portress was old and very rheumatic. She was full of apologies when at last she peeped through the judas and saw who was waiting.

"M. Claud," as the nuns all called him, finding his surname too hard for French tongues, was a friend and a benefactor, and both were needed in these hard times.

The Reverend Mother was too unwell to receive visits to-day, but doubtless Sœur Amélie would see him if he came to the parlour.

Claud, accustomed to think himself the most unlucky of men, found everything arranging itself with incredible ease. Sœur Amélie was as stupid as she was kindly, and more deaf than she would allow. What she could not hear, she supplied from her imagination.

On no account would he have told a lie to any of the



good sisters; it was no fault of his that the tale Sœur Amélie carried to the Reverend Mother's sick-bed was of a ward of his, young, devout, and beautiful, who had been overtaken by illness as she was making a pilgrimage, and begged for shelter at the convent. Like Mme. Barbeau, the one point she clearly grasped was that a handsome payment would be made for hospitality; on this head M. Claud was most emphatic.

The Reverend Mother was too ill, and still too ignorant of English manners and customs, to realise the improbabilities of the story, even if she had been disposed to look for them. Her chief emotion was one of gratitude to La Bienheureuse Elisabeth, their foundress, who thus sent help at a desperate strait. Some time ago, the Mother had received a hint from certain quarters that as the number of her sisters was dwindling, and as her resources were almost at an end, it would be wiser to join with some other community. Of late the hints had been repeated, with insistence, and the Mother saw herself unable to disregard them much longer. Though a nun may be vowed to poverty and humility, she may still be proud of belonging to a community founded by a saint of her own blood, and she prayed day and night that their foundress would plead for her children to be spared this humiliation.

The payment named by M. Claud would be more than enough to cover expenses, and if the patient were devout, she might bestow a thankoffering on the community, after her recovery. Perhaps—who knows—she might even feel impelled to join them.

So the Sœur Infirmière was bidden to prepare a disused room which, being beyond the enclosed part of the house, might lawfully be used for visitors. Claud seized upon the old horse and cart given by the

former owner of the Manor for the use of the convent, and his luck still holding, managed to convey Honor and Mme. Barbeau from the lonely house without encountering Polly, or any curious passer-by, and, which was almost a miracle, without the poor beast dropping dead by the way. Before the Angelus rang at noon, Mme. Barbeau's Sunday cap was pinned out to dry, and the sisters were busy with a very bad case of measles.

## CHAPTER XVII.

By the time that she reached the convent, Honor was unconscious, and for many days afterwards she lived in a debateable land between dreaming and waking.

Sometimes she was contented, believing herself to be in safety beyond the reach of her guardian or of the man whom even in delirium she would not call her husband. She lay drowsing among her pillows on the little white bed, under the blue and white statue of Our Lady, lulled by the click of Sœur Agathe's beads, or the soft whisper of Sœur Eulalie's prayers. At other times the fever would run high, so that it seemed as if the blood would burst from the ends of her fingers, the pain in her side would stab her with every breath she drew. Then the bed would turn to a steep hill, up which she was climbing, a hill so high that it hid the sun and moon. The stars all came out to dance "Lavender Bunches," and she would have danced with them if her shoes would have kept on her feet; but they grew bigger and bigger till one of them fell off, and she could not find it again because Farmer Lapworth had taken it for a coffin for his dead baby. Then she thought: "If one shoe is large enough for a coffin the other is large enough for a boat," and at the word she

found herself floating in it, down a wide grey river; Miss Lester and Nurse were on the bank, and she tried to turn the boat, but it drifted on, and they would not look at her. Then Jane was there with the nuns all round her, and they were cutting off her hair, and as each long golden ringlet fell upon the ground, Isaac picked it up, squeaking "Redhead! Redhead!" and flung it into the water. Honor would have tried to pull out the ringlets as they floated towards her, but the boat swept on faster and faster, and no one on the bank would hear the cry. Then she would struggle and gasp till she woke, and the sister by the bed, hearing a piteous little moan, would lift her, rearrange the pillows, and pour something down her throat, something which always tasted nasty, though it did not always look the same. When it was about a table-spoonful of thick liquid, Honor knew it to be medicine; something warm out of a bowl was broth, and there was a cool clear draught which relieved her terrible thirst for the moment, but everything tasted alike to the fevered mouth.

The nuns fought for her life with every weapon in their power. Those who had no part in nursing her gave themselves the more to prayer. To lose the first patient who had come to them from the outer world for many years would have been grievous in any case, and moreover the patient was the ward of M. Claud, to whom they owed much. The Reverend Mother herself arose from her sick-bed to help the nurses. As for Fenwick, he was at the convent gate at dawn and at dusk, for news of her. Sœur Marthe, the portress, knew when to expect him, and her shaking hand would be fumbling with the little shutter before he had time to ring the bell. With every wish to make the best



of it, her cheerful, "*Eh bien*, Monsieur! she must be worse before she can be better," soon changed into "There is always hope for the young, Monsieur."

He would have been distracted but for an obstinate conviction that his lady had not been sent to him, as by miracle or by fairy favour, to be lost before he had won her. The days were terribly long; he had no heart for any scientific work, and no distractions of any sort except an occasional visit from Mme. Barbeau, who was always optimistic. "*La rougeole? Hé*, Monsieur knows it is a nothing. The children have it, and to-day they are half-way to Paradise, to-morrow or the day after they are back again, more troublesome than ever. I remember when our demoiselle had it." The details that followed were so intimate that Fenwick hurriedly escaped, and wandered up and down upon the heath until it was time for his evening visit to the convent.

Soeur Marthe's eyes were red and swollen when they peered at him through the judas that evening. The poor angel was very ill indeed; Reverend Mother begged M. Claud to come to the parlour and speak with her.

The parlour, cold and bare and terribly clean, struck a chill into his heart. He knew every detail in it, from the plaster group of La Bienheureuse Elisabeth kneeling at the feet of Our Lady on the chimneypiece, to the vase filled with paper roses, and the little books of devotion on the round table in the middle. Only two days before his lady came to him, he had spent over an hour in that parlour, mending the invalid leg of one of the wooden chairs set stiffly against the wall.

The Mother was standing near the door leading to the inner part of the convent, a tall gaunt woman with more than a suggestion of a moustache upon her upper

lip. She did not seem formidable to Claud, who knew her well, and knew that the frown meant anxiety, not displeasure.

"I asked you to come here, Monsieur, because we fear Mademoiselle Lester is very ill. We heard that the doctor was visiting the Manor again to-day, and I was able to send word to ask him to come here. He says that she is much worse than when he saw her last week."

"Last week, he thought it might be smallpox, and he was wrong. He may be mistaken again."

"I fear not, Monsieur. Even we can see a change for the worse. He advises that we should send for her relations if there are any living near here."

"There are none. She has none left alive." Honor had assured him on that night of their meeting that they were "all dead." Even if he had known of any, he would not send for them to come between his lady and himself.

"You will pardon me, Monsieur, but I did not understand from Sœur Amélie exactly what was the relationship between you and Mademoiselle."

"If she lives she is to be my wife."

"Your wife?" The Mother shot a keen glance at Fenwick from under her white coif. "Then"—she hesitated uneasily—"it is of the most serious, Monsieur; the doctor scarcely expects her to live through the night."

"Do you think that I am not serious, Reverend Mother?" cried Fenwick, losing his self-control for the moment. "If she is to die, I must see her once again."

"She would not know you; when she is not unconscious, she is delirious."

"She will know me at the gates of death. For pity's sake, Reverend Mother, let me see her."

"Wait here for an instant; I will return," said the Mother, suddenly yielding to her own kind heart. "After all," she reflected, as she rustled along the damp, cold passage, "*La Bienheureuse Elisabeth* was married and loved her husband; she will understand."

Tossing on her bed, Honor thought herself caught among the laurel bushes, struggling to escape, while the raindrops pattered down upon her head ("but they can't be real raindrops," she said to herself, "they are red-hot.") She made a violent effort to break away and found herself on her knees, trying to wash the purple lattice pattern from the hearthstone, with the fire beating upon her head till she could feel and hear her brains boiling, and all the while she was held by the train of her wedding gown, which was wound round and round the fender. She pulled at it, and discovered that she was churning for dear life in the middle of the drawing-room in Brunswick Square, with Mr Rivers rattling his seals and telling her that Sir Charles was coming to throw her into the fire if there was no butter for his breakfast. And how could she make butter when there was nothing in the churn but marigold petals and silver beads?

The long meagre clock in the corner of the parlour ticked away ten minutes before the Mother came back.

"Will you follow me, Monsieur? Our *Sœur Infirmière* thinks that it can do no harm for you to stand in the doorway and look in."

As he climbed a narrow staircase in the wake of the Reverend Mother's grey robe, an acrid odour of burning came to his nostrils; *Sœur Eulalie*, anxious to lessen the risk for him, had set light to a handful of brown

paper, and was waving it up and down just outside the door. Through the reek he saw Sœur Agathe stooping over the bed, trying to hold down a little white-robed creature with a small face framed in a soft white cap. The red curls were no more to be seen; by the doctor's orders they had been shorn from her head.

"*Mon cœur, ma mie*, my little lady." The words came, half-French, half-English, as was his wont in excitement, but he could not tell whether actually he spoke them. In his heart he was beseeching her not to leave him lonely and hopeless in his broken world. "You can mend it if you stay with me. Why did you come if you are to go at once? If you shut this door of hope, no other will open for me but the door that leads into darkness."

It was useless; he could find no words to speak. She was slipping away from him, and he could not reach her. All his soul went into a voiceless prayer, he knew not whether to "*Bonne Vierge Marie*," to his dead mother, or to the living girl who moaned and struggled on the bed. He made a step forward, and reaching past Sœur Eulalie, laid his hand upon Honor's hand.

The burning grey eyes turned to him, and the hard stare went out of them. A smile flickered on the quivering lips. Honor knew the tall dark man who comforted her by the fireside in the lonely house, and understood, in some strange way, that he was not her father, and yet that she was safe with him. The fever-imp melted back into the darkness whence they came. She ceased to fight against the kind arms that held her. Her thin hot hands fell down upon the blue cross on the coverlet, and she lay still.

The Mother, standing motionless behind Fenwick, her



hands hidden in her long sleeves, thanked Bienheureuse Elisabeth from her heart. Her momentary suspicion of "M. Claud" was gone, never to revive. Though she had left the world without more than a glimpse at its ways, she knew that a man who had succeeded in forcing his mistress upon the shelter of a convent would not look as Fenwick looked at that moment.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

It was such a mild calm day as sometimes brightens the month of November, when a pale sun makes pretence of forgetting that winter is drawing nearer every hour. The leaves were nearly all gone from the trees, under the bare hedges was a tangled mass of dead stems and dry seed-vessels, and the feathers of the Traveller's Joy had lost their whiteness and softness in the wind and rain of autumn. At the edge of the common, the berries on a row of little holly bushes glowed smooth and scarlet. Mr Gore, the apothecary, jogging along upon his grey cob, cast his eye over them, and thought that it was going to be a hard winter; the sight of the few orange-yellow blossoms still thrusting themselves here and there from among the brown needles of the gorse reminded him pleasantly that kissing was not yet out of fashion. (He was on his way to a plump and comely widow, who had promised to marry him after Christmas, if Bony did not land by that time.)

Across the common a figure was striding towards him. Mr Gore recognised Mr Fenwick, and pulled up the cob.

"A fine day, a very fine day, sir—a day like this shortens the winter, as one might say."

Claud bowed gravely, in rejection of the snuff-box that was held out to him. "The Reverend Mother at the convent told me yesterday that you pronounced Miss Lester recovered."

"Convalescence is fairly established, my dear sir, fairly established. Those were my very words. The good ladies may congratulate themselves upon their intelligent following of my directions. Really, for foreigners, they are quite intelligent," allowed Mr Gore with an air of making a generous admission. "I was obliged to leave a good deal in their hands, as on account of the distance, and my very extensive practice, I could not come over to see the young lady as often as I should have wished," said the worthy man, quite unsuspecting that if he had been able to bleed Honor as frequently as he thought advisable, she would not have required any medical attendance for very long.

"And you think that there will be no permanent injury to her health?"

"None whatever, my dear sir, none whatever. Miss Lester will need care for some time, but that is the way with most charming young ladies at her age. Light and wholesome diet, change of air, cheerful society—I presume you don't intend to make a nun of her?"

"A nun?" Claud was visibly perturbed. "On no account! She came to the convent merely to be nursed, not to take the vows."

"All the better; I never could approve of shutting up pretty young girls between four walls, and tying up their heads in bandages as if they had the toothache. Shut up the old and ugly, that's all very well, eh, sir? But if you will pardon me for saying so, in view of my position,"—Mr Gore cleared his throat and looked

proudly round him—"another time if your ward seems indisposed, don't run the risk of moving her, even to a convent. Let her stay wherever she happens to be; she as nearly as possible slipped through my fingers. By the way"—Mr Gore put his head on one side and looked at Claud with an inquisitive eye—"I have not yet made out from those good nuns where Miss Lester was when she was taken ill."

"They speak very little English," said Claud imperturbably, "and I suppose you do not often have an opportunity of practising French."

"French? Lord bless you, sir, what business has any decent man to be speaking French in these days?" demanded Mr Gore. "It would ruin my character; every one would ask what sort of company I had been keeping to learn it." ("That's one for my gentleman," he reflected with mild triumph. The little apothecary was the kindest-hearted of men, who could and did forgive any injury except a check to his curiosity.)

"Perhaps the nuns may be excused for speaking their mother tongue," suggested Claud, without betraying his amusement. "At any rate they must understand English fairly well to follow out your directions."

"I took great pains to make myself understood, sir. I flatter myself that even a dolt might have comprehended me, and those good ladies are far from being dolts—very far from it, I assure you. When they caught my meaning, they carried it out implicitly—implicitly. I could find it in my heart to wish that some other people were as reasonable as these poor Papists." Mr Gore took a little snuff, and sneezed pensively. "Speaking quite confidentially, I could tell you of a lady living not many miles from here who thinks herself competent to prescribe for the whole neighbourhood—



it is only by the mercy of Heaven, as one might say, that she has not killed half of them. There was my predecessor, Dr Chilcote—he and she were at daggers drawn. If she heard of any one who was ill, on the property or in the village, she'd be there, at the bedside, and get some poison of her own decoction down the patient's throat long before he could be sent for. But he taught her a lesson one day. He was asked to sign a death certificate of an old man who died after taking her nostrums for a week, and what do you think he gave as the 'cause of death'?" asked Mr Gore, leaning down to poke Fenwick in the ribs with an emphatic forefinger.

"I have no idea," said Fenwick, telling the untruth that the occasion demanded.

It was Mr Gore's favourite story, and none of his acquaintances escaped hearing it frequently.

"'Madam Marsh, with the best intentions.' He put 'the best intentions' to save himself from an action for libel, but Squire Marsh was furious, and it was a good thing for Mr Chilcote that he was retiring from practice."

Mr Gore took a triumphant pinch of snuff, which made him sneeze so violently that it disturbed the grey cob, which had been standing in a half-dozed, and now suddenly started off at the top of its speed. Luckily for the apothecary, this was no very alarming rate. Fenwick watched him bumping along the road, until it was evident that he had recovered the reins, and then turned to walk up the way that led to the convent.

He was going to his lady. He had been allowed momentary glimpses of her through a window. He had even been allowed to wish her good-day, and to hope that she was feeling better, but this afternoon,

for the first time, he was to be allowed to pay her a visit,

He supposed that if she were fit to be questioned, he must find out something more about her. For himself, he wanted to know no more than he knew already—that her name was Honor, that there were no relations who might set up a claim to her, and that she had come to him in the moment of his blackest despair, when all else failed him. But it might be as well to have something more to tell the Reverend Mother. Though Honor knew no French, and the nuns could speak only a few words of English, there had been some awkwardness in their finding out, when she began to recover, that she was not of their faith. The Reverend Mother remarked to him, in a very dry tone, that when arranging to nurse Miss Lester in the convent, she had understood her to be a Catholic.

“I did not know or care what her creed might be,” returned Fenwick. “I saw a child at the gates of death, with no one to care for her, and thought this would be sufficient claim to your hospitality.”

“Sœur Amélie told me that Miss Lester was making a pilgrimage.”

“It is the first I have heard of it,” said Fenwick. The Mother sighed, having spent great part of that morning trying to establish that she did not tell Sœur Amélie that the sisters must put on clean coifs because the Bishop was expected, when her actual words were that the wood must be stowed away in the shed before more rain fell.

“Our poor Sœur Amélie is much troubled with her ears,” she admitted; “but, Monsieur, if Miss Lester was not on a pilgrimage, what was she doing?”

Luckily for Claud, the interview was interrupted

here by one of the sisters, who was obliged to ask for instructions upon some matter of business, and the Mother did not repeat her question at the next interview. Honor by this time was the pet and plaything of the whole convent, and the Mother must have possessed a much harder heart than beat under her black scapulary if she had insisted upon turning her out while it was still a fresh pleasure to dress her up in her new clothes.

In the first alarm that Honor's illness might be small-pox, Sœur Agathe, whose notions of hygiene were superior to those of her day, burned everything which she wore when she was brought to the convent. When the patient was thought to have turned the corner, Sœur Agathe asked whether Monsieur Claud could arrange for some of Mademoiselle's clothes to be sent from wherever she had left them. Monsieur Claud, after much racking of his brain, remembered an old maid of his mother's who had married a stage coachman. He went up to London, found her at the old address, and easily persuaded her to come with him and buy what was required for the outfit of his ward, a young lady whose clothes had all been destroyed by the doctor's orders. He was very uneasy lest some old acquaintance might recognise him in the street, but as luck would have it, he met no one whom he knew, and was spared inconvenient questions or studied coldness. Once, in coming out of a milliner's shop, where they had been buying dainty caps of lace and India muslin for the shorn head, a stout lady, with a black pug in her arms, stared very hard at him, and seemed about to speak. He walked on, and turning round at the corner of the street, saw her still standing in the doorway, staring after him. It must have been some mistake; the old

lady was evidently short-sighted from the way in which she screwed up her eyes. He could not remember having seen her before.

The contents of the parcels that he brought down with him afforded the sisters more pleasure than any one can realise who does not remember the joy of dressing up a doll. It took quite half an hour's consultation between Sœur Agathe, Sœur Eulalie, and Sœur Monique, who was regarded as an oracle on the subject of dress, her sister having been one of Mademoiselle Bertin's best customers, before they could decide which cap and negligé should first be put on for Reverend Mother to see. In honour of Monsieur Claud's visit, they would have tried every article of dress in turn, to be sure of finding the most becoming, but for their fears of tiring out their patient.

Claud had no fault to find with their work when he was admitted into the parlour, where Honor sat in the large arm-chair that he had sent up from his own house, with Sœur Amélie standing on guard behind her. Now that he was in her presence, he had not courage to look at her; his first glance was at the sister's broad countenance, beaming with satisfaction and goodwill. "A benevolent dragon with a swollen nose," he thought, and the absurdity made him smile as he bowed. The pale-blue and white draperies in front of him slowly bent and swayed. He found courage to raise his eyes gradually until they left Honor's negligé for her face as she swept one of the elaborate old-world curtseys which Miss Lester used to consider part of the whole duty of a gentlewoman, and at which Brunswick Square had laughed. Yes, it was the same face that looked at him with a glance, half-shy, half-dignified, from the



hazel eyes. The little curls were beginning to show once more at the edge of the filmy cap with the blue ribbon. Only the thin white fingers veined with blue, that held the back of the chair to steady her, did not seem to belong to the strong brown hand that he remembered clasping Mme. Barbeau's rosary.

"It is very good of you to consent to receive me, dear Madam."

"You are very good in wishing to see me, sir."

There was silence.

Sœur Amélie smiled encouragingly upon them, and observed that it was a fine day.

"Have you been in the garden to-day?" asked Fenwick, catching at a subject of conversation.

"I walked all round it by myself this morning," said Honor proudly.

"You grow better every day. You will soon be able to go beyond the convent grounds."

Honor looked startled. "I am very happy here. It is beautiful in the garden."

"Do you know this part of the country?" asked Fenwick carelessly.

Honor frowned with the effort of thinking.

"No, it was dark—and the birds were crying all round."

"You have never lived in Sussex?"

"No, I lived in Somerset." Honor's tone was confident and easy now. "Have you been there?" In Brunswick Square, she had always been interested to find out whether her cousin's visitors knew Somerset, and was generally disappointed by their denying all acquaintance with such a barbarous part of the world, where no one went but the good folk like Mrs More

and Mr Wilberforce, who wanted to turn the people into Methodists.

"I was taken to Bristol Hot Wells when I was a boy, with my mother, who was drinking the waters."

"Bristol? Oh!" said Honor, disappointed. Bristol was as remote from her world as Sussex itself.

"You lived with your father and mother in Somerset?"

"No; my mother died when I was born. I cannot remember my father. He left me with Miss Lester and Nurse."

"My mother died when I was a boy," said Claud, venturing to draw his chair a little nearer, as Sœur Amélie was looking out of the window. A conversation in English gave no scope to her imagination, as she could not make out enough of it to embroider. "I suppose Miss Lester was your aunt—or your great-aunt?"

Honor put her hand up to her forehead. "No—she—she said she was not related to me, but she loved me very much. She kept me when my father died, and my cousins said they were too poor to do anything for me. My name is not Lester, really," she added, with such a look of distress and puzzlement that Fenwick leaped at once to a conclusion.

"What does that matter? I am sure the nuns never call you anything but *chérie*—unless it is *mon ange*."

Sœur Amélie suddenly looked round with a suspicious air.

"I am beginning to teach Mademoiselle French, so that she may understand all the amiable things you say to her," he had the presence of mind to explain.

"*Bien*, monsieur! but she will understand very

quickly of herself. She already begins to speak to us," said Sœur Amélie, not altogether satisfied.

"What will your doctor say if you become a French scholar?" Fenwick asked Honor. "I met him on my way here this afternoon. Has he told you his favourite story?"

He repeated the tale of Dr Chilcote's death certificate, hoping to drive away the anxious weary look on Honor's face, as if she were searching for something that she could not find. At the climax she gave a little cry of distress.

"Madam Marsh? it was to her that they wanted to send me."

"To send you——"

"She said that she would train me. I do not need to be trained. I can do clear-starching and mend lace. I mended my cousin's Brussels lappets, so that Jane could not see the stitches. I can bake, and I can make butter and cheese," pleaded Honor, putting together all the accomplishments she could remember, with her hand on her aching forehead. "Oh, do not say that I am to go to her!"

Claud bent forward, speaking quietly and tenderly as to a child. "You shall not go to her; you shall not go anywhere unless you like. Are you happy here?"

"Yes, indeed I am. Every one is so good to me; it is so clean and so peaceful—and I am so tired."

"My little one, you are fatiguing yourself," interposed Sœur Amélie, catching the look rather than the words. "Monsieur must not talk to you any more to-day."

"But there is one thing I must say," begged Honor, laying her cheek against Sœur Amélie's red hand,

with a little rubbing caress, like that of a sleepy kitten. "How long have I been here? It feels as if it had been a very long time?"

"It must be about six weeks," Fenwick decided after a hasty calculation. He could not have told, at a guess, whether it were weeks or months.

"It must have cost money for the sisters to keep me. I had some money—I think it was fourteen guineas."

"The money is quite safe; the Reverend Mother asked me to take charge of it for you. There will be no difficulty about paying for your board so long as you are here, and you must not think about anything else till you are quite strong again."

"Every one is so good," said Honor gratefully. "Jane told me that at the convent at Hammersmith the nuns would take in any one who was in trouble and had very little money. Miss Lester was dead, and I had nowhere to go; I thought Nurse Tanner must be dead too, as she was old and very ill. So I tried to go to the convent, but it was dark and I was very wet and thirsty, and I went into a house because some one said the master was out."

"And the master came in, and found that the fairies had sent him a visitor."

Honor laughed, the childlike happy laugh that enabled Mr Rivers to maintain that she was incapable of deep feeling. "The fairies ought to send him something very good, to reward him for his kindness."

"Perhaps they will—perhaps they have already," said Fenwick, overcome by impulse, and thankful the next moment that Soeur Amélie had broken in upon him with protests that "*la petite*" was as white as a chestnut flower, and must not say another word.



Fenwick was given scarcely time to make his bow, before being hurried to the door, and his last glimpse of Honor showed her held down in her chair by the sister, to prevent her trying to make her curtsy.

Another smile, another trustful look, and he would have been unable to keep himself from telling her what was in his heart. The time was too early as yet for such avowals; it was like taming a wild bird to sit upon your hand—a sudden movement, a hasty word, might undo all his work.

Meanwhile, from to-day's conversation with her, he had gathered the outlines of a pathetic little story. He had no doubt that Honor was one of the many children for whose existence there was no legal warrant. The morals of the day made it very likely that she came on both sides of gentle blood. This would explain her undeniable air of breeding, and also the curious position which she held with Miss Lester, not acknowledged as a relative, without any right to bear the name, trained to make herself useful, and yet fondly loved and protected. No doubt the old lady endeavoured thus to atone for the thoughtlessness of a scapegrace nephew. Like many old women, she must have neglected to make a will, or perhaps it was not in her power to leave any provision for Honor; after her death, other members of the family repudiated any responsibility for the girl, and thought their duty done when they arranged for her to be received into Madam Marsh's household.

The story fitted with what he had observed in every detail. It completely satisfied Fenwick, leaving him free to believe what he wanted most, that no one could claim the fairies' gift from him. As rendered by him the story drew tears from the Reverend

Mother, whose conscience was henceforth quite at rest about allowing Honor to remain beneath the sheltering arm of Bienheureuse Elisabeth.

As if to show that Heaven approved, one small piece of good luck after another fell upon the convent from the date when the waif was brought to its door. The village mason mended the hole in the roof for nothing; their cow had two calves, one of which they sold at a price beyond their hopes. One of the Manor gardeners gave them a day's work, and in the course of digging a bed, came upon Reverend Mother's ring of profession, which had been lost unaccountably three years ago, and mourned every day since then.

"For me, I cannot see that it matters whether Mademoiselle is a heretic," pronounced Mme. Barbeau, "so long as Reverend Mother remembers that it is her duty to charge twice as much for her board as for a good Catholic. The good father told us in his sermon last week, that while we are bound to show charity to others, we must not forget our religion—and what else could he mean?"

## CHAPTER XIX.

THROUGH the winter of that year, while all England waited in suspense for the descent of a French invasion upon her coasts, the household of the Bienheureuse Elisabeth scarcely remembered that there was such a thing as war. In Sussex and other districts where the invader might be expected, ladies were at work quilting guineas into petticoats, as the easiest means of carrying money if they were obliged to flee from home, and contriving hiding-places in house or garden for the plate and jewellery too heavy to be carried away. Their fathers, brothers, and sons drilled by day and night. Even Squire Marsh came out of his library and changed his wig and dressing-gown for a scarlet uniform, in which he delivered a stirring harangue to the local militia, beginning with the words, "Gentlemen, I'm an old man, but a young soldier," which was generally considered equal to anything hitherto inspired by the war.

The nuns owned no property. If once more they were to be driven forth into the world, they had nothing to take with them except the clothes on their backs, and the sacred vessels of the chapel, which were easily carried, so there was no reason for them to waste

labour or thought on preparations for flight, and in recreation time they might concern themselves with really important matters, such as the robin with the broken leg which Sœur Marthe was nursing into convalescence, and the home-spun which Sœur Cathérine was making into aprons for the community, and the uncertainty as to whether Sœur Marie Josephe would be able to finish the new set of altar linen in time for use on the twenty-first anniversary of Reverend Mother's profession.

Fenwick, a little more in touch with the world than they were, and not forbidden to read newspapers, nevertheless had preoccupations of his own which often made him forget that he lived at a time when history was being made. A phrase in a book that he studied, a chance recollection of the talk of one of the *savants* whom Lady Elystan derided, had set him upon some scientific work that promised to be of deep interest, even if he did not achieve the result for which he hoped; and for his recreation, there were the visits to his "ward." It was understood that he did not come more than three times a week, unless for some urgent reason, one or other of the sisters having always to be present as a chaperon; but, in spite of these restrictions, he succeeded in making Honor more at her ease with him than she had been with any one since leaving Witham, and in talking to her as he could have talked to no other creature on earth.

She was always ready to listen, whether he spoke of his boyhood at Guesthwaite, of his mother, or of his work, her shrewdness and quick sympathies preventing her ignorance from becoming tiresome or stupid. Once he told her how his mother used to dance for him "*sur le pont d'Avignon*"; Sœur Cathérine, who happened



to be the chaperon for that afternoon, was overheard humming the tune afterwards, as she kneaded bread, and was rebuked for levity.

When Honor talked to him it was usually of the everyday happenings of the convent, or of something of which he had talked to her. The events of her life in Brunswick Square and at the farm were so confused with the delirium of her illness that she could not be sure how much was a fever dream, how much reality. Even her life in Somerset had grown vague and far-away. If she made any allusion to it, Fenwick always contrived to suggest some other topic; he honestly believed that the less she thought of the past, the better it was for both her mind and her body, and like many men, he was not greatly interested in his lady's everyday life before he came into it. As soon as he established to his own satisfaction that there was no one with any claim to interfere between them, he was not anxious to hear more. It was right and natural that she should listen eagerly to all he chose to tell of his past life, but what could she have that was worth remembering, before the day when they met for the first time?

So the short December days slipped away, with more quiet happiness in them than he had known since his boyhood, and the New Year began. On a day in January, going up to the convent, he found the Mother in the parlour, radiant with joy. He must figure to himself that two, veritably two ladies had applied to be admitted into the community. In all the years since they left France they had received only four new sisters, and two of these were boarders in the convent who shared their flight. Was not this a fine way to begin their year? She was in such exultation that

she must needs describe to him, not for the first time, all the sufferings of the community from the day when the troubles in France began, and all this, with her comments and moralisings upon it, scarcely allowed him any opportunity for speech. As for Honor, she sat busy with a piece of fine needlework, following the Mother's story as far as she could. If it had not been that she once or twice looked silently to Fenwick for an explanation of some word that puzzled her, she would have seemed unconscious of his presence.

When he rose to go she made a request: Sœur Agathe had broken the rivet of her spectacles, and if she sent them into Petworth by the carrier to be mended, she would have to wait several days before getting them back, and she was almost helpless without them. "Monsieur Claud mended them for her last year, but she was ashamed to ask him again, so I told her that I should ask M. Claud," said Honor, looking up entreatingly. "She walked against the chapel door this morning, and there is a terrible bump on her forehead. Sœur Eulalie says that the winter is the worst time of the year for Sœur Agathe to break her spectacles, because there are no lily leaves to steep in vinegar and put upon the bruises that she gives to herself."

When Honor went out of the room to fetch the spectacles, the Mother turned to Fenwick.

"A sweet child, truly, monsieur, and one whom we all love. Indeed, we have asked ourselves whether there could not be three postulants instead of two. She is happy here, and seems to have brought blessings to us."

"But she is not a Catholic!" exclaimed Fenwick in dismay.

The Mother coughed. "Not absolutely, perhaps, monsieur, but I think she is with us in heart, and after a little instruction——"

"She has no vocation! I never intended——"

"As to the vocation, monsieur, that is not always apparent at first. From what you have told me she has no name and no home. It is true that you spoke of making her your wife; but is it not possible that taking these things into consideration, she would be safer and happier with us?"

"She shall not be a nun——"

"That must be as you please," said the Mother, looking him straight in the face, from under the shadow of her stiff white frill; "but I would ask you, monsieur, to consider whether it would not be better to let her understand, when you make your proposal in form, that, if she will become a Catholic, there is always a home for her with us. We would receive her without a dowry rather than see her driven into marriage because there was no other refuge for her."

At that moment Honor returned, and Fenwick was obliged to pocket the spectacles and go away, without another word beyond a ceremonial leave-taking.

He reached his house in a fervour of wrath. He had shown many kindnesses to these old women. He had given them alms more disinterested than any which they received, since he put no faith in the efficacy of the prayers which they offered daily for their benefactors. He had trusted them with what he valued most in the world, and they requited him by trying to steal the treasure for themselves. He would save her from their clutches. Rather than have that sweet face muffled with coif and wimple till nothing was left uncovered save eyes, nose, and mouth, he would

burn the convent over their heads one frosty night, and carry her off with the strong hand, as his far-away ancestor "Dick-o'-th'-Gill" carried off a nun from Kendal in the old times.

As soon as he had lighted his lamp, he fell to work upon Sœur Eulalie's spectacles; he would take them back next day and speak to Honor, though the Mother and the whole community stood round to guard her.

As his fine dexterous fingers set the new rivet into place, a thought came that made him put down rivet and spectacles on the table, and stare blankly in front of him.

What right had he, a man under a cloud, to take advantage of a child's innocence? She was too young, too unused to the world, to know what she would do in marrying him. She had no friend or kinsman who could hear all his story and judge whether what he had to offer was fit for her.

He could ask her to share his poverty, knowing from what little he allowed her to tell him of her past life, that to her it would seem wealth. But the name handed down through generations in the North Country was stained to the eyes of the world, and he might not ask her to share it.

Knowing his own integrity, he had rejected all thought of clearing himself, proudly convinced that the friends who would not believe him on his unsupported word were not worth keeping. There is a mocking imp who sits in some corner of the brain, waiting for the moment when he can make us see our fatal errors after it is too late to alter or amend; some few of us are strong enough to answer him with "What then?" and go on; these are the successful people. Many are too deaf to hear him, so that he



withers away and dies, stifled in his cell ; these are the happy. Those like Fenwick who are clever enough to understand his lightest hint, and yet have not the strength to put him on one side and go on, *quand même*, are bound to suffer cruelly.

There was no help for it, as the imp told Fenwick repeatedly in the course of that night ; his reputation was gone, and his life wrecked, in great measure by his own perversity and obstinacy. If Champneys were to come back from France to-morrow, and could show that Fenwick had no part in his arrest, the world would always be of opinion that "there must be something wrong about Fenwick, or old Harbord would never have cut him out of his will." He threw away this one remaining chance of retrieving his fortunes when he rejected Lady Elystan's help. "A broken man" he had chosen to be ; a broken man henceforth he must remain, and Honor must not be asked to pick up the pieces, for fear of cutting her fingers.

Yet she should not be driven to marry him as a refuge from Madam Marsh ; she should not be driven into a nunnery as a refuge from him. On this he was determined, although he could see no other way of deliverance for a nameless, penniless girl.

After a sleepless night, he was no wiser than before. It was diversion, as welcome as it was unexpected, when the post brought him a letter written on very stiff paper with a gilt edge, and sealed with a large red seal. His family lawyers had the honour of acquainting him that various documents were awaiting his signature. If he expected to be in London shortly, they would be much obliged if he could make it convenient to call at the office. If not, they would take the necessary steps to forward the documents to any

address that he might give them, and they remained his obedient servants.

Any excuse for two or three days' absence was welcome; Fenwick felt that he could not bear to see his lady again at the moment; before he returned, some plan for the future might occur to him. Sœur Eulalie's spectacles were delivered at the convent, with a note to the Reverend Mother to say that Fenwick was called away on business to London, and was uncertain of the day of his return.

"It is easy enough to shake off a man,—as easy as shaking an onion paring from the lap," said Mme. Barbeau, who was engaged in the convent kitchen, suiting the action to the word when she heard this piece of news, "but to get him back when you want him again is quite another pair of sleeves. If monsieur does not come back, and mademoiselle is left *plantée là*, what is to become of her, *hein*?"

The lay sister, who was cutting up the onions for potato soup, was too conscious of her own inferiority in Mme. Barbeau's eyes to attempt answering the question.

At the lawyer's office in Lincoln's Inn Fields, Fenwick was made sensible of the change in his position. On former visits he used to be shown at once into the room of one or other of the senior partners, who received him with all the deference due to the owner of Guesthwaite and the heir presumptive to the Harbord fortune. Now he was kept waiting for some time in the outer office, among clerks and messengers, before being taken to a condescending young gentleman, who informed him that both the partners were engaged, but that it was not necessary

for him to wait until they would be at leisure; such a trifling business could be done without their presence.

Fenwick having suppressed his desire to kick the young puppy, and signed his name as required, was on his way downstairs, when from a door on the first floor appeared the Senior Partner, wearing the bland smile that his kind usually put on for the reassurance of the well-to-do female clients. Behind him came a stout lady in a sea-green pelisse, with a pug dog under her arm.

"Be careful, my dear madam. Here is a dark corner of the stairs. If you were to miss your footing, we should never forgive ourselves. Will you take my arm?"

The lady had stopped dead upon the landing, and was staring hard at Fenwick, who stood on one side to let her pass, a ray of light from a window-slit above him falling across his face.

"The stairs are not really steep. How do you do, Mr Fenwick. A fine day for January. My dear madam, do you feel unwell? What is the matter?"

The Senior Partner's inquiries were cut short by receiving a black and somnolent pug thrust suddenly into his arms, and the lady flung herself upon Fenwick.

"Claud! it must be Claud! don't you remember me?"

Claud stared for a moment, and then with a flash of recollection, cried joyfully, "It's the lady with the monkey!"

There was an exclamation from the step where the Senior Partner was struggling with the pug, followed by his observing in a tone of deep offence, "Pardon me, Mr Fenwick, the animal is not a monkey, but a pug

dog, and as far as appears to me, of a most unfortunate disposition."

"What, has he bitten you? Dear me, sir, I am so sorry!" cried the lady, turning round, still holding Fenwick with one hand while she stretched out the other for the dog. "Give him to me, the sweet angel! Yes, Pug, it was very wrong of you to bite that kind gentleman. But he can't really have hurt you very much, his teeth are so small, though they are sharp. As a matter of fact, do you know, it is much less painful to be bitten by a dog if he has sharp teeth. Oh, there now, I've dropped my reticule—do be quiet, Pug! Will you hold him, Claud! A sweet little dog, my dear; you'll not be afraid of him."

"Mr Fenwick no doubt is too gallant to object to sacrificing his fingers in a lady's service, Mrs Joad," said the Senior Partner with some dryness. The lady was already half-way downstairs, sweeping Fenwick after her.

"You must come back and dine with me, Claud; I'm staying in my cousin's house in Bedford Square for a few weeks. She will not get in your way; she is down at Cheltenham, drinking the waters, and I came up to Town to buy some things I wanted for the house at Osmundsbury. I live at Osmundsbury, you know. Get into the carriage. Good-day, Mr Pringle, I hope your finger will soon be well. I am sorry that my naughty Pug forgot himself—a sweet little dog, my dear Claud, but hasty. He really meant nothing by it, you know,—he bit the Dean of Osmundsbury on Christmas Day. He is very sensitive, poor darling, and I think he was upset by something—perhaps the Dean's gaiters. But anyhow, a fine strong man like you can't feel being bitten by a little tiny dog. Yes,



tell the coachman to drive home, please; good-day—and if your finger is sore, put some of that new ointment upon it—I forget its name, but it is advertised in all the newspapers. It makes some people come out in a rash, so perhaps you had better try it on one of your clerks first. What a fuss men do make about trifles! I'm sure Pug has bitten me twenty times, and I never give it a thought. I hope he won't charge for it in his account; I tried to soothe him down by calling him a fine strong man, because I thought it would please him; did you ever see such a queer little fellow as he is? just like a goldfish! My dear Claud, how glad I am to see you again! To think of your remembering me and poor Jacko, after all these years!"

"They have not altered you," said Fenwick, disentangling one end of the lady's scarf from the buttons on his sleeve.

She laughed a jolly laugh. "I had no looks to lose. When you have a face like a turnip, and a figure like a Dutch cheese, there is nothing to spoil. Now, your dear mother,—but she would never have grown old if she had lived to the age of Methuselah. Wrinkles and grey hairs would have made no difference to her, though I cannot fancy her with them."

"She went before they came to her."

"Better so," said Mrs Joad, drawing out her pocket-handkerchief unaffectedly and wiping her eyes. "Those like her ought to go when they are at the best. But what a loss it was! Even now, I can't believe that I shall never see her at her wheel under the window in the hall. Mr Pringle tells me you have sold Guesthwaite. Well, no wonder that you could not bear it without her."

"It was nothing of the kind," said Fenwick

doggedly; "she died when I was a boy. I did not sell Guesthwaite till last year. If Mr Pringle told you of my affairs, he probably told you that I am not Mr Harbord's heir, and that I'm supposed to be a French spy."

"He did not tell me about Mr Harbord's will," said Mrs Joad, without betraying any surprise. "I read it in the paper. He must have been out of his mind."

"Public opinion agreed with him."

"What does that matter?" demanded Mrs Joad, looking at him through a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles set on the tip of such a very small nose that it was difficult to understand how they stayed in their place. "Of course it is very tiresome and very unjust that you have lost all that money, but there is no sense in making yourself unhappy about what stupid people think, when they never knew your father and mother, and so can't know that you never could be a spy or anything dishonourable."

Something rose in Claud's throat, and he turned his head away and stared out of the window, while Mrs Joad chattered on, seemingly indifferent as to whether he were listening to her or not.

"There was that silly old Pringle, licking his lips and backbiting, like an old pussy-cat. I never could abide cats, and my poor Jacko hated them too. Do you remember how he used to shiver at Guesthwaite, and roll himself up in my boa? He always liked you, because you never teased him. He died ten years ago—before I married my second husband. I was Mrs Woodhead then—a perfectly odious name, my dear, but after all, quite between ourselves, he was rather an odious man——" Fenwick made a sound that might have passed for a laugh.

"The only happy times in my life used to be when he went shooting partridges in Norfolk, and I came to your mother at Guesthwaite. Dear, dear! it's not many wives that would be as good to their husband's distant cousin as she was to me. You might say that I was a safe visitor, for there was nothing about me to make women jealous, but your mother could have held her own against the handsomest. There I used to come, year after year, from the time you were a baby, and such a pretty baby as you were. Just that one month helped me through the whole year, and to think that she died before she got the letter telling her Mr Woodhead was dead of a quinzy! She would have liked to know that I was going to be happy at last. Here we are at cousin Arnott's front door, and if you are as hungry as I am, you will be glad to think it is close on dinner-time. There is nothing makes one so famished as going to see a lawyer, for you never know but that he'll tell you that all your money's gone, in one way or another, and if it is, you may as well have a good dinner, as it will be your last, and if it isn't, you're so relieved that you'd be ready to eat an ox. Not that you'll get an ox for dinner here; poor cousin Arnott is so weakly that she can't digest good victuals, and her cook has never learned to make anything but gruel and panada."

## CHAPTER XX.

HONOR sat in the corner of the recreation-room working with a thread as fine as a cobweb while the sisters stood by, advising and admiring, careful not to get between her and the dim light that struggled through a very badly glazed window.

Strictly speaking, by convent rules Honor, who was not even a postulant, had no business in the sisters' recreation-room. But then, as Sœur Cathérine said, where was the poor little one to sit? In the old times in France, when the convent was full of boarders, childless widows of good birth and narrow means, young wives whose husbands were on duty with their regiments, there was a sitting-room for guests. But now it would mean keeping up a fire merely for Honor alone, which would be a sinful extravagance, and the child was not yet recovered from her illness, and might mope if she were left to herself, which would be to undo all the effect of their nursing. Moreover, she was mending a chalice veil which was one of the few treasures saved from their old chapel, and it was absolutely necessary for some of them to be at hand to advise and direct.

"Be sure you do not strain your eyes, dear child.



I have never been able to see anything properly since last I tried to mend that veil."

"You will be very careful when you come to the shield; it is the blazon of the grandfather of Reverend Mother's grandfather, who gave us the veil."

"Argent, on a chief azure, a *fleur de lis* of the first," said Sœur Monique, "but Reverend Mother's grandfather quartered the arms of his wife."

"Which he had no right to do," said Sœur Eulalie promptly; "my granduncle married the elder sister."

All the sisters knew Sœur Eulalie's one lingering human weakness to be her family tree, and Sœur Cathérine hastily interposed.

"Our little Honor ought to study the art of blazon. Every demoiselle should know something of it."

From where she stood behind the girl, Sœur Monique frowned a rebuke at Sœur Cathérine, who at once remembered the version of Honor's story for which Fenwick was responsible, and was overcome with confusion at her blunder.

Luckily at this moment entered Sœur Marthe, who had been called away from the rest by a ring at the bell.

"I bring news, *mes sœurs*. M. Claud is here."

There was a general flutter of white coifs, and murmuring of low voices.

"Here? Did he ask to come in? When did he return?"

"He returned only this morning," said Sœur Marthe, dropping on to one of the hard wooden chairs with a little grimace of pain at the twinging of her rheumatic knee, "and he asked to see Reverend Mother at once. He has important business with her."

There was another murmur.

"He has been a long time in London."

"It must be ten days."

"He has never been away for so long since he came to live near us. He must be glad to return; they say that London is all smoke and dirt. Perhaps he was not in London all the time."

"In his letter to Reverend Mother he said that he had met an old friend."

"Ah, these old friends! they lead us into trouble," murmured Marie Josephe, who, as the eldest of the community, took more freedom of speech than was allowed to the rest. "Doubtless she is a widow."

The bell rang to recall the sisters to their occupations, and they hurried away, each with a word or a look for Honor as she went.

As the door closed behind Sœur Marthe, hobbling last of all, Honor gave an involuntary sigh of relief. The convent was peaceful, the sisters were kindly as on the day when she was brought to their door, but the continual hush and repression, grateful to worn body and strained nerves, now began to be irksome. She called herself ungrateful, told herself that the affection of these good women was more than she deserved, and contrasted the peace and quietness of the haven in which she was resting with what she suffered in her few hours with Sir Charles, or in her ten days at the farm. Nevertheless, she was weary of it [all]; the soft subdued voices, the restrained gestures, fretted her; the long intervals of silence had lost their healing power, and made her feel as if she were half asleep or half dead. In the midst of assuring herself that this was far better than Brunswick Square, even on the fortunate days when Mr Rivers was away from home, she was seized with a wild craving to romp

once more in the nursery with the children. The sisters were too old; nearly all half blind, or deaf, or decrepit, they would never understand how she longed to run and dance and play.

It was only since M. Claud went to London that the restless fit came over her. That half-hour in the parlour every two days seemed to fill up her thoughts and prevent her from chafing in her cage. She thought of that September evening when she went out to seek her fortune, of the golden streak of sunlight on the edges of the clouds, and the warm scent of the honeysuckle nodding at her from the hedges. Then she looked round the bare room with the whitewashed walls, cold and dank in spite of the fire smouldering ill-temperedly upon the hearth. The winter sun had not strength to pierce through the panes of thick green glass. A few sickly snowdrops, gathered by herself in the garden that morning, hung their heads in a little glass cup below the image of Our Lady; the cold seemed to have taken away what little scent they had. There was no spirit of high adventure in the air; all was quiet and passionless as a churchyard.

"Must I stay here always, and be dead too?" thought Honor. "It is worse than the churchyard; the live people never come to walk here — except M. Claud."

A rustle of garments came along the passage, and the Mother entered the room.

"Ah, you have ceased to work, *ma petite*. You are quite right; it is dark, and it would be a pity to spoil the best pair of eyes in the convent. But was it necessary to leave the thread upon the floor?"

Honor flushed crimson as she picked up the skein from the floor, whence it had slipped from her lap,

forgotten, as she sat with idle fingers and wandering thoughts.

"I did not know who would mend that veil when Sœur Monique could no longer see how to do it. We all grow old here."

The Mother sat down upon one of the high-backed chairs and looked wistfully at the girl standing beside her.

"But we grow all together—is that how one says it in English?—so that we do not comprehend how old we are, unless we see some one who is young. Then it is happiness for us to have a young creature among us; but we must not forget, as M. Claud says, that the young seek to the young."

The crimson flushed again in Honor's cheeks.

"Doubtless it seems to you, my child, that M. Claud he is old also."

"No, indeed!" protested Honor. "How can he be old?"

"He has grey hairs and wrinkles."

"He is not old at all," said Honor stoutly.

The Reverend Mother looked thoughtfully at the beads hanging from her girdle.

"Sit down, *chérie*," she said, after a brief pause. "We will talk a little, you and I. You are happy here?"

The question was so sudden, so unexpected, that Honor, her fit of restlessness not gone completely from her, could not make her assent sound as hearty as she wished it to be.

"M. Claud was here this afternoon. He says that you are too young to renounce the world before you have seen it. He tells me that his cousin, who has no children, has need of a young girl to live in her house.



She asks you to stay with her for a few weeks. If you please her, and she pleases you, it might be that you remained with her."

"To stay with her? Not in London?" Honor's cheeks were white instead of crimson.

"No, not in London. She is in London now, but the day after to-morrow she goes down to her house at Osmundsbury. She will stop here on the way and take you with her."

"Then I am to go?"

"But of course you are to go, my child."

"M. Claud's cousin does not know me, she has never seen me. How can she wish me to stay with her?"

"If M. Claud wishes it, that suffices for her, no doubt. She has known him since he was a little boy, and has always had for him a friendship of the most sincere."

Honor considered, pulling her thimble on and off her finger. "Is the cousin old?"

"She is of the age of the most part of us, my child. For you she would be old, for me she would still be young. She used to visit the mother of M. Claud when he was a little boy. But though she cannot be young, M. Claud says that she loves young people; you will not find the house *triste*."

In the dark the shadow of the coif concealed the Mother's face, but a dispassionate observer might have noted something in her tone which suggested a smile.

"You have been so good to me. I can never thank you—what can I say? What can I do?" Honor's face was hidden on the grey lap.

"You must not cry. You have nothing for which to cry. You will go with M<sup>me</sup>. la cousine and be happy."

"And if I am not happy?" Honor's hand, still thin and white, clasped that of the Mother, laid upon her hair.

"But you must be happy."

"On my obedience?" asked the girl, with something between a sob and a laugh, repeating a phrase caught from the sisters.

"On your obedience, *chérie*. But if veritably you cannot be happy at Osmundsbury, after you have tried all that is possible, you can remember that we have always a place for you here. Now we must think of preparing for your journey."

It was as well that the interval allowed for preparation was not long, for, in spite of convent discipline, the laments of the good sisters were piteous. Their patient was to be taken from them before she had recovered her strength completely, and handed over to a stranger of whom they knew nothing. It was true that she was the cousin of M. Claud, but *voyez-vous, ma sœur*, there are cousins and cousins. And then, there was the question of her religion. Proselytising in form was out of the question with a minor whose guardian was nominally a Protestant, but no one could help showing the poor child how to cross herself, and how to say the Hail Mary, and so forth. Now she would be among heretics, and would forget it all. Sœur Eulalie could not sleep at night for thinking of it; Sœur Monique, for the first time in her life, forgot the oil for the sanctuary lamp.

Honor knew not what to think, whether to be glad or to be in terror. There was a grotesque reminiscence of her last journey, when the sisters thronged about her to dress her in the cloak and bonnet M. Claud had brought down from London, and mingled tears and

wishes for her happiness, with hopes that she would come back to them one day.

"Dark green is the right colour for the child, undoubtedly," murmured Sœur Marie Josephe.

"Decidedly, Mme. la cousine has good taste," responded Sœur Agathe, all unaware that Mrs Joad's original choice for Honor's travelling dress had been a bright salmon-coloured pelisse with a sky-blue turban, and that it had taken all M. Claud's diplomacy to substitute the green.

At the convent gate Fenwick was looking out for Mrs Joad's carriage, with a load off his heart. Mrs Joad's persistence in taking up their friendship exactly where it was left in happier times had won him to confidences before he knew what he was doing. She was one of those women who at first appear silly, yet have somewhere about them a strong vein of practical good sense, and she dealt straightforwardly with his fears and scruples.

"You say there is no one to judge for her, and she is too young to judge for herself whether she prefers you to a convent. Well, then, let her come and stay with me till she is older. She may see other beaux, though it is not very likely; there is not a man in Osmundsbury Close except the Dean and Chapter, and all of them have been married at least twice. But it will give her time to grow older."

Claud did not know that when he had gone away, after trying vainly to thank her, Mrs Joad had looked over the top of her spectacles and remarked, as if she were addressing the ball of wool in her lap, "At any rate it will give you time to be sure whether a Fenwick of Guesthwaite can marry a love-child."

After making this arrangement, Mrs Joad found that

Fenwick would have no difficulty in coming down with her to Osmundsbury. It was only fair that he should; she must go considerably out of her way in order to pick up Honor, and would be obliged to sleep upon the road. Her coachman was newly engaged, and, although he came with a flaming character, she could not feel certain that he would remain sober throughout the journey, and there were sure to be difficulties at the inns, even for a lady travelling in her own carriage.

Fenwick began to think that the coachman must have yielded at once to temptation, when more than an hour passed after the time settled for Mrs Joad's arrival, and nothing was to be seen of the plum-coloured carriage. To add to his discomfort, heavy rain began to fall. He was driven to ring the bell and ask whether he might wait in the parlour.

Honor, at the far end of the room, beside Sœur Amélie, greeted him with a formal curtsy, but without the smile to which he was used. She looked pale and heavy-eyed; was she unhappy at leaving the convent, or was she merely tired of sitting bolt upright in her travelling dress? Whichever it was he was resolved to know; she should not be dragged away from the convent against her will, whatever that old woman advised. (Claud for the moment forgot the gratitude that he professed and really felt for Mrs Joad's inspiration.)

After a few commonplaces upon the inconvenience of the rain and the tedium of waiting, he boldly made his venture.

"*Ma sœur*, Miss Lester looks very pale. I am afraid as Mrs Joad is so late in coming that it may be very



late before we get to the end of to-day's journey. Do you not think that Reverend Mother would permit her to take a little refreshment? A glass of milk, perhaps."

Sœur Monique, whose temper was quick, once did penance for saying that Sœur Amélie might as well have had a dandelion clock as the head on her shoulders. Sœur Amélie now proved her right by jumping up and hurrying off as soon as she understood what M. Claud wanted, forgetful of the glaring impropriety of leaving him alone with Honor.

"Reverend Mother explained to you where we are going?" he asked, disregarding Honor's protest that she was not tired, and did not want milk or anything else. "You are sure that you are willing to go?"

"I am very grateful for—for the lady's kindness," said Honor with the ghost of a smile. "But I do not know her name, because Reverend Mother never calls her anything but *Mme. la cousine*."

"She used to be Mrs Woodhead when I was a boy; now she is Mrs Joad. She is kindness itself. You are sure to be happy with her."

"But there is one thing—I thought that I told you when I was ill, but I cannot be sure. It is so hard to know what I dreamed and what I really remember."

"Do not try to remember anything. There is no need."

"But I must remember this," persisted Honor, looking up with troubled eyes. "Did I tell you—did you know—who I was? It is not as if I could be like—like every one else. Mrs Joad ought to know, if she

is taking me into her house. I could not help it—but she might think that it made a difference, though I had nothing to do with it.”

“You must never think of that again,” he said, standing over her and speaking with authority. “Yes, I knew all about it; you told me when you began to get better. You are quite right; my cousin ought to know it, and she does know it, and knows that it makes no difference to you.”

Honor leaned back in her chair with a long-drawn sigh. “Oh, I am so glad!”

“Forget it, as I have done. There is nothing for which you need trouble yourself.”

Then into the parlour hurried Sœur Amélie, to say that Reverend Mother had given leave for the milk to be brought, followed by Sœur Monique with the milk, which was not drunk to the last drop when Sœur Marthe hobbled in to say that a magnificent equipage was at the gate to fetch Miss Lester. On her heels came the rest of the community to say good-bye. The Mother cut the farewells short, and no one saw the tears in her eyes as the green cloak went out at the door, followed by Claud.

“Ah, my dear, I’ve kept you waiting a little,” said the voice from within the carriage. “It was too bad of me, but I could not help it. I had the toothache for three days and nights, and not a wink of sleep did I get last night—turned round and round in my bed like a pig roasting at the fire. So this morning I sent for a surgeon to draw it, and that made me late in setting out. But if you’ll believe me, my dear, it was worth while. I’ve not felt such a relief since my first husband died. Are you quite comfortable? Put this cushion at your back. Do you like the window up

or down? If you undo that basket on the seat, Claud, you will find sandwiches and some of the old brown sherry Mr Joad used to be so fond of. Poor dear! he would drink it, and it always gave him gout."

The carriage rolled away from the convent gate.

Honor believed that she had confessed the story of her marriage, and that Fenwick had pronounced it to make no difference. Fenwick never dreamed that she meant to tell him anything more than that she was born out of wedlock.





PART III.



## CHAPTER XXI.

IN an afternoon in July the thrush in the rose-tree was very busy with the large striped snail-shells that he found under the garden wall. He was one of the old-established residents in Osmundsbury Close; he built his first nest in the garden some years before Mrs Joad thought of taking the red-tiled house. On her arrival he was distant; at his age he did not care to make new acquaintances. At the same time, he did not wish to move into the garden next door, although it was larger and he had many friends there. Nothing could be more to his taste than the climbing rose-bush trained to arch over the little stone-paved walk in his own garden; in fact, when he came to think of it, the thrush was inclined to believe that the path had been flagged because the Dean and Chapter knew how convenient he found it for cracking snail-shells.

So at first he did not commit himself, though he was disposed to think well of Mrs Joad when he found that she did not bring a cat with her. Mrs Joad on her side made no advances.

One day, however, there came into the garden another human being, petticoated, like the greater part of the dwellers in the Close, but with an air about her

as if, like the thrush, she belonged to the open air and the green fields, not to streets and houses. She took notice of the thrush at once, throwing him bread-crumbs and setting a red earthen saucer full of water for him by the old sun-dial. The sparrows had the impudence to bathe in it too, as was only to be expected from such upstarts; but the thrush knew that it was filled every morning on his account.

Honor gave the impression to others besides the thrush that she did not belong to the life of the Close. She seemed aloof and remote from the little world of Church dignitaries with their comfortable houses, their wives and their large families; of old scholars, who sat late at night reading and writing very dull books; of old ladies, who came to enjoy such meagre facilities for devotion as were given in English cathedrals at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Mrs Joad fitted very well into the picture: her worldliness gave delightful opportunities for being scandalised to those of her neighbours who considered it their duty to be "serious," while it was a welcome relief to others who liked good wine, a good dinner, and a good laugh.

Honor looked as if she had strayed from another world, as if a pixie were to be found among the illustrations to one of Mrs Trimmer's Sunday books. Yet there was no question as to her being at home in the red-tiled house. Before a week was over, Mrs Joad had forgotten that the girl was no fitting match for a Fenwick of Guesthwaite, and taken her to her heart as if she were the young cousin who she was supposed to be.



"My dear Claud, we are all descended from Adam, so it is not an untruth, and it is the best way to stop people talking. It would be quite as untrue to say that she is your ward, and not nearly so convenient."

If the Close were not satisfied with this explanation, Mrs Joad was always ready to answer any questions with a cheerfulness and volubility which prevented the inquirers from realising at the time that they knew no more of Honor for anything she told them. Her finest achievement, perhaps, was when she took twenty minutes, without appearing to draw breath, in replying to the Dean's wife, who wanted to know whether Miss Lester were connected with the Lesters of Buckinghamshire, and left that formidable lady as wise as she had been.

Watching Claud intently through her gold-rimmed spectacles, Mrs Joad soon came to the conclusion that his feeling for Honor was no passing impulse born of chagrin and boredom, but a resolute determination such as possessed his father when he insisted upon marrying Mdlle. de Harlay, in spite of the opposition of the families on both sides, and in spite of the bride's own want of enthusiasm. To combat the resolve would make it only the more obstinate, and there was no hope of its dying a natural death; there remained one service for a devoted friend to do him, and that was to make Honor less unlike the young ladies from whom a Fenwick of Guesthwaite would be expected to choose his bride.

So Mrs Joad found a master who condescended to instruct Honor in singing and playing on the piano-forte. ("He had made it a rule not to take beginners; but, as Mrs Joad pointed out, the circumstances were

exceptional, Miss Lester having been prevented by illness from applying herself until now, and having, one might say, an exceptional talent"—which was almost exactly what the good man had said in turn of each of the Bishop's six daughters and the Dean's three nieces.) In Honor's case, at least, there was a correct ear and a sweet voice to justify him. Another master came twice a week to show Miss Lester how to copy "studies" and "landscapes," of his own composition, in lead pencil, with elaborate shading, holding out to her the prospect of being promoted to the use of water-colours by-and-by. Honor, sitting at her desk in the window, her fingers blackened with the soft lead pencil, and grimy bread-crumbs strewn round her, sometimes felt as if it were scarcely worth while to take so much trouble, even to attain the honour of reproducing Mr Webb's masterpiece—a ruined Gothic archway, shaded by a cypress-tree, with a lake in the foreground. It was nearly as uninteresting as the Cathedral services, to which she was taken on three days in the week; for herself, Mrs Joad would have been contented with the two hours and a half in the morning and two hours in the afternoon, which made Sunday a weariness of the flesh to her generation; but she felt it right to take Honor to the services on Wednesday and Friday mornings, in order to counteract any taint of "Popery" that might have been acquired among the nuns. She suffered less than the girl, as she always crossed her feet upon the very lofty hassock in front of her, and slept profoundly, excepting at the times when the congregation stood up. Honor endured passively, with a good child's submission to what its elders think right.

Far more to Honor's taste was the dancing-class to which she went twice a week, when a lean, shrivelled

Frenchman, with a big wig and a little fiddle, instructed the young ladies of the Close, and of the neighbouring county families, in the fashionable steps. The romantic misses were quite sure that he had been a Marquis, if not a Duke, and that he had danced with Marie Antoinette at Versailles. Honor noticed that he spoke French like the Reverend Mother. There was little in common between her and the misses, and she did not make friends with any of them, as Mrs Joad would have wished. With the children it was different. A children's class was taught by the Frenchman's daughter, at the other end of the long room, and in the intervals for sitting down Honor was never without at least half a dozen of them, the smallest on her lap and the rest clustering round her.

At the beginning of her visit, Honor once or twice demurred at receiving masters, clothes, and other expensive presents from Mrs Joad, but that lady would hear no remonstrance. "My dear, if you were not here I should have to have a companion to make tea, and sort out my wools and read to me, because it is the right thing at my age, and she would be sure to bore me horribly, or else to bully me, and I should have to pay her something for making my life miserable: now I don't pay you anything, so you must let me give you that new bonnet as a reward for saving me from her; and besides, I like something pretty to look at. And as for the music lessons, they are pure selfishness, because I like to hear you singing. Music is all very well if one knows what it is about, but when people sing in Italian you never can tell whether you are meant to cry or not."

As she grew stronger and busier, her past life became more and more shadowy to Honor. She was told to

forget, both by Claud and Mrs Joad, who discouraged all allusions to the time before her illness. Sometimes she thought tenderly of Miss Lester and of Nurse; more rarely, she supposed that Jane might be married by this time to Mr Egerton, but all of them seemed alike to belong to the dead. Once or twice it crossed her mind to wonder what had become of Sir Charles; the thought was driven away upon the instant. If ever he had troubled to look for her, he must have given it up long ago. He would understand that it was not a real marriage, for Mr Fenwick said that it could make no difference to her.

The July sun streamed fiercely upon the rose-bush, and the thrush began to think he had eaten nearly enough snails. Perhaps he would fly over the wall to the next garden, and call upon some old friends there. No, it was too hot; in the corner, under the shadow of the laurestinus, was the best place for the present. What was that? As he lived, it was the Precentor's cat. Of course he was not afraid, but he could not endure the impudence of the beast slinking about his garden. That was Honor's fault; she petted it and talked to it when she met it straying about the Close. Such creatures could not stand being noticed—it made them forget their place. Where was Honor? She ought to come and drive it away.

The garden gate clicked, but only to admit a tall man in spurs and riding-boots, who, instead of walking along the path, went across the grass plot in two or three steps, taking one of the little flower-beds in his stride, and walked into the house without stopping to ring the bell. The thrush recognised him as the man who came every three or four weeks, and was not interested, except inasmuch as his entry sent the Pre-



centor's cat up the ivy over the wall, from which it dropped down into the Close just in the nick of time to swear at the King Charles spaniel which the Bishop's second daughter was leading by a string. The spaniel whined distressfully to his mistress, who was looking after Mr Fenwick, and had forgotten her pet for the moment; in a place where nine men out of every ten were connected with the Cathedral, a good-looking bachelor, with the reputation of being somewhat advanced in his opinions, excites more attention than is his due.

In the panelled room upstairs sat Mrs Joad, bending over a large frame, with which she had been too busy to look out of the bow-window over the Close to see who went by, as was her custom. Fenwick's entrance took her by surprise, and she pulled herself out of the large arm-chair, scattering scissors, thimble, and bundles of coloured wools all over the floor.

"My dear Claud! I was not sure whether to expect you to-day or to-morrow, but I am so glad it is to-day, because I wanted your advice on a most difficult matter. Did you leave your horse at the White Hart? Just pull the bell—you'll like a glass of wine after your ride. Now, my dear, I was going to ask you——"

At this instant a grey parrot in the window overlooking the garden set up an ear-piercing screech.

"Oh dear me! I am so sorry," cried Mrs Joad, trying to raise her voice above the din. "I quite forgot, he can't bear me to ring the bell. I think we had better wait till he has finished, dear Claud; it only excites him to hear talking."

With a set mouth Fenwick devoted himself to picking up the odds and ends that lay strewn about the carpet, Mrs Joad trying to dissuade him in dumb show.

"You'll only heat yourself after your ride," she told him at last, in a compromise between a shriek and a whisper; "and he dislikes to see any one moving about the room when he is as nervous as this."

"Then he shall not see it any longer," said Fenwick with grim determination, catching up a newspaper and enveloping cage and bird in it.

"He'll tear 'The Porcupine' to bits," sighed Mrs Joad resignedly, as the parrot's shrieks died down into croaks; "but the Dean says it ought to be burned by the hangman. Take the keys, Stubbs, and bring the Madeira and the biscuits. It really was too bad of him to behave like this, but it is lucky Pug was not here; the poor darling can't bear to hear Poll scream."

"That is the first sign of intelligence I have ever noticed in Pug," said Fenwick drily.

"And so he barks, and that makes Poll worse, and they go on sometimes for twenty minutes between them, unless Honor is here. She is the only person who can do anything with Poll. But Pug has gone out. Honor took him; she was going in a boat with the Bishop's grandchildren, so I said we would put off dinner for an hour, but if you would like it earlier——"

"Don't make any change for me, Cousin Louisa, I beg. You were saying that you wished to talk to me about—was it business?"

"So I did—how clever of you to remember it!" exclaimed Mrs Joad, stopping in the midst of counting her bundles of wool. "Now, I declare, Poll's screeching has quite put it out of my head; what could it have been?"

From his knowledge of his cousin's affairs, Claud was

able to suggest one or two points, but she shook her head at each.

"No, it was not about the man who wanted five shillings because he fought in the Seven Years' War, because he was taken up as an impostor the other day, and he turned out to be a woman after all. He—I mean she—wrote to the Dean's nephew to ask for a loan because she—no, he—had been drowned falling over Hardham Bridge and left a widow and six children under three years of age, and the Dean's nephew hoped some of them were triplets, because he had often heard of triplets, and never seen any, so he went to look for them, and found out that she was a single woman with only one leg, and quite respectable, so she couldn't have even the usual kind of children. I thought he might have dealt kindly with her, but he is a magistrate, and he was very much disappointed about the triplets, so he has sent her to jail."

Claud sipped his Madeira, and wisely refrained from further suggestions.

"How kind of you to pick up all those wools!" went on his cousin. "I have pulled this skein into a sad tangle. I must wait until Honor comes home to put it right for me. No, it was not the gentleman who kindly offered to lend me money—or the other, who said he could show me how to double my income in six months. Where did I put the red wool? Oh, of course, I know what I had to ask you—my dear Claud, did you ever see an elephant?"

"Are you meaning to set up one as a pet?"

"No, my dear boy, how can you talk such nonsense? It was because the Dean said that a scientific friend told him an elephant was the same thing as a pig."

Fenwick could subdue his feelings no longer, and Mrs Joad laughed with him, quite contented.

"You are so like your mother when you laugh," she said, when he began to apologise, "it does me good to look at you. Of course, I did not begin to explain at the right end. It's this piece of woolwork, my dear; I worked it for a fire-screen for Mr Woodhead long ago, thinking he would be pleased, with his crest, which was a wild boar—but he was not pleased at all, because he hated fire-screens; in fact, he broke up one that Miss Woodhead made for him, and used it to mend the fire, and he said that it was the only use that a sensible man could make of such flummery. So I put it away and forgot all about it, and then I found it the other day, rolled up with some odds and ends at the bottom of an old trunk, so I wondered whether I could make it up for a seat for the dining-room chair that is getting worn out, only it did not seem quite right for me to use Mr Woodhead's crest after marrying Mr Joad. Then I remembered that the Dean's friend had said a pig and an elephant were the same sort of animal, so I thought perhaps I could turn it into an elephant; you see it has tusks already."

With one of Honor's drawing-pencils Claud executed a design which, if not very much like an elephant, was still more unlike a wild boar. Mrs Joad was delighted with it.

"What a comfort you are, my dear! whatever one asks, you are sure to be able to do it. And now it is nearly dinner-time, and Betty will have your room ready for you. How long will you be able to stay with us?"

"I—I have not quite made up my mind." Claud



threw down the pencil and rose from the chair before the desk. "It seems to me that I am no farther on than I was five months ago."

"Is your work very troublesome?" asked Mrs Joad sympathetically. "It is good of you to slave at it as you do. When I see young men loitering away their time in idleness—not that we see many young men here."

"My work is going on as well as it possibly can. I begin to see the end of it. It is my suit that gets no farther."

"But, my dear Claud, have you ever begun it? You said it was not fair to declare yourself to Honor until she had seen other men."

"And you agreed with me, Cousin Louisa."

"Of course I did, my dear; I always do. You always should agree with a gentleman, and hope he may be more sensible later on. I learned that much very soon after I was married to Mr Woodhead."

Claud bent down over her chair and kissed her forehead. "You are not married to me. Tell me what you think."

Mrs Joad took off her spectacles and shut her eyes for a moment, as if she were in church. "How long did you say it would be before you had finished this piece of work?"

"I did not specify any time," Claud answered in an aggrieved tone. It was hard, he told himself, that the old lady could never keep to the point. "With luck, I should have done it by Christmas."

"Then suppose," suggested Mrs Joad, with eyes still shut, "that after you leave us, this time, you do not come back until you come to spend Christmas."

Fenwick uttered such an ejaculation of astonishment that Mrs Joad's eyes opened suddenly, as if with a spring.

"My dear, it is not that I want you to keep away. But I think that it may be the wisest course for you both. Honor is such a child that I think she is living happily from day to day without thinking of the future. She knows that if you are not here this week, you will be in another fortnight or ten days, and so she cannot be said really to miss you. Now if you were to stay away for a longer period, she would begin to miss you."

"Or to forget me altogether."

"If I anticipated that result, I should not suggest your staying away," said Cousin Louisa with great dignity. "I may tell you, Claud, that she always puts on her best gown if she knows that you are expected."

"Probably she would do as much for any company that you chose to invite."

"She is always fit to be seen, at all hours of the day, which is more than can be said for some of the young ladies here—crumpled negligés, my dear, and torn caps—but I have never known her bestow particular pains for any one but yourself."

"And she is not—no one else is paying her attentions?"

"One of the canons wants to teach her Hebrew, because he says it will be the language of heaven, but he has a wife with a squint. (Besides, he offered to teach me too, but I said that I must take my chance of picking it up from the angels, which I am afraid I shall never do, for I was always stupid at learning, but the angels won't rap my knuckles with a gold pencil-case as my governess used to do.) Wherever

she goes the gentlemen are sure to notice her, but she behaves as if they were not there; they might as well be so many cabbages—though, if you come to think of it, it would be odder still to see a row of cabbages in a drawing-room than a row of gentlemen.”

With this reflection Mrs Joad waddled out of the room, and Claud stood in the bow-window meditating over her advice.

Was he strong enough to stay away from Osmundsbury for over four months? And if he were, was there no risk that some one might not step in when his back was turned and carry off his lady? Cousin Louisa seemed to think there was no chance of it, but she was infatuated about his mother's son.

As he gazed vacantly out of the window he saw Honor. She had said good-bye to a party of children at the corner, and they were going down the path that led to the Bishop's palace, while she came across the greensward under the elm-trees. Her hair and bonnet were disordered by the parting embraces of her little friends; with one hand she held the string fastened to Pug's collar, and in the other carried a tuft of pink flowering rush. She did not look up as she passed under the window, and he watched her push open the garden gate. Pug wheezed asthmatically and she stooped to catch him up.

“You know you are doing that on purpose, to pretend to your mistress that you are tired. You have had a most agreeable morning, and they gave you the most comfortable cushion in the boat.”

“Honor! Honor, my love!” called Mrs Joad from her window. “You will be late unless you make haste; Mr Fenwick is here, and you must not keep him waiting for his dinner.”

"Indeed, ma'am, I will not be a minute. It was delicious upon the water, and we saw a kingfisher, but Pug barked at him and he flew away."

As he changed his riding-clothes in the best bedroom, which was always reserved for him, Fenwick could hear Honor's voice from her little room at the end of the passage, singing a canzonet of Haydn—

"Come with me, and we will go,  
Where the rocks of coral grow."

The mermaid's song might have been written for the clear young voice, free as a boy's from any touch of human passions.

On the stroke of the hour he went into the drawing-room. Honor was sitting on a low stool beside Mrs Joad's arm-chair, giving an account of the morning's adventures.

"And then Tommy pulled it away from her and overbalanced himself, and fell into the bottom of the boat and cut his knees. Miss Cope says that when the children went out with their grandfather the other day, Tommy nearly fell into the water, and the Bishop said it would have served him right if he had been drowned. But the children are always naughty with the Bishop. How do you do, Mr Fenwick? You must have had a hot ride."

"Dinner is served, ma'am."

"Oh, I am so glad!" cried Honor. "I am so hungry!"

"I will certainly not come back till Christmas," thought Fenwick, as he gave his arm to Cousin Louisa and conducted her downstairs to the dining-room.



## CHAPTER XXII.

"I AM sure his breathing is more oppressed this evening, Honor."

"I really don't think he is snoring more than usual, ma'am."

"Snoring, indeed, child! You know nothing about it! I tell you the complaint is on his lungs."

"Shall I desire Stubbs to go for Mr Cantlie, ma'am?"

Mrs Joad and Honor were contemplating the pug, who lay in a basket close to the fire, and blinked his staring eyes with a sleepy pride in having asserted his right to being the most important person in the house. That odious Poll was banished to the servants' hall, because its screeching was bad for the invalid. His appetite was tempted with all manner of delicacies usually withheld from him. When he executed an ostentatious shiver, Mrs Joad went herself to fetch an Indian shawl to wrap round him; it smelt horribly of camphor, which Pug disliked, but he felt dimly that it was an honour, and after he had scratched and fidgeted it away from his nose the odour was not unbearable.

Honor was kneeling beside him, stroking his smooth black head with a cool firm hand. Pug put on an air of languid endurance, intended to disguise from her

that a slight cold in the head was the worst of his ailments.

"Stubbs will be sure to be tiresome if I expect him to go out after dark," sighed Mrs Joad. "I really don't know what is to be done."

"Shall I go?" Honor sprang to her feet in a single bound.

"You, my dear Honor? Don't be absurd. How could you go out alone after dark and in the rain? And if I have to send Stubbs with you he will be just as cross as if I ask him to go by himself."

"But I would put on an old cloak and hood and run very fast, and no one would recognise me in the dark. It has stopped raining—I should not get wet. Pray let me go, ma'am."

"You must be beside yourself to talk such nonsense," said Mrs Joad sharply. "As if a young lady could go running through the streets alone at this hour of the night! What can you be thinking of? Besides, if he were to see you going out, you know Pug would want to go with you, and that was the way in which he caught his cold, poor love, running after you on Sunday on the wet grass."

Pug opened one blood-shot eye to see why Honor was not stroking him. She was sitting on the low chair beside the little table, where stood the silver candlestick, pulling her needle in and out of a piece of fine muslin. Mrs Joad was sitting at the end of the sofa, close to the fireplace. Both had forsaken him; Pug felt neglected, but too sleepy for more than a whimper of protest as he turned in his basket.

After all, it was a comfortable situation, for a pug or for his mistress. Thick red velvet curtains were drawn across the bow to keep out the cold of the

autumn evening. The candle and the firelight made broken rainbows in the glass lustres of the chandelier and of the tall candlesticks on the chimneypiece. On the round table beneath the chandelier were two or three books which Honor had fetched from the library that morning, a vase of flowers, and Mrs Joad's work-basket. From the white-panelled walls looked down the portraits of Mrs Joad's mother and other female relatives; the males were hanging in the dining-room, which she considered the most proper arrangement. "They were so ugly, my dear, that no one would care to look at them, and you don't gape at pictures if you have a good dinner in front of you."

Comfort was all very well for a pug, but the pug's mistress required something else besides comfort; Mrs Joad was bored, and being bored, was inclined to be peevish. It had been raining all the afternoon, which prevented her from going out, and it was dismal indeed to sit at home and hear the bells ringing muffled peals for Lord Nelson. We had beaten the French, which was the main point, but should we beat them again now that he lay dead? It was all very distressing, and the Dean had put off his dinner-party, which annoyed her very much; as Mrs Joad said frankly, there could be no great pleasure in dining with the Dean as long as he was married to his present wife, but she meant to wear her velvet gown and the turban ordered on purpose from London, and was disappointed. Then it was between three and four months since Claud's last visit to Osmundsbury, and Mrs Joad, who missed him sorely, began to think that she was paying too much for the pleasure of forwarding young people's love affairs. She was angry with him for acting on the advice to stay away, although it was her own,

—angry with herself for giving it, and angry with Honor on whose account it was given. If it were not for Honor, Claud might have been with her at that moment. Mrs Joad was fully alive to the prestige she derived from the visits of a young unmarried man, and fancied that she saw signs of its waning as week after week passed, and Claud did not appear. She knew it for a fact that Mrs Wellman received her invitation to the Dean's dinner-party quite two days before herself, although Mrs Joad's claim to be asked before Mrs Wellman was undoubted, whether you went by the table of precedence or by the alphabet.

And all this, because a silly chit could not make up her own mind. She had a good mind to send her away. . . .

Mrs Joad knitted furiously for some ten minutes, nodding her head with a little angry jerk at the end of each round, and then discovered that she had forgotten to decrease after turning the heel, and dropped three stitches by the way. A hasty attempt to unpick made matters worse, and Mrs Joad pushed her cap crooked in her annoyance, and dropped her knitting needle.

"May I have it for a moment, ma'am?" Honor picked up the needle before Mrs Joad could make up her mind whether to look for it under the sofa or on the hearthrug.

It was difficult to be angry with her, the old lady decided, watching the dexterous fingers set the tangle in order. She was a sweet girl, amiable, unselfish, always ready, always smiling. No; when she came to think of it, Honor's smile was not so often to be seen as it used to be; it came in response to a word or a look, but it did not hover about her lips when she sat



silent over her work or her drawing. She practised dutifully for her music master, but Mrs Joad could not remember to have heard scraps of song, as at other times, floating in through the windows from the garden, or echoing from the big room where the linen was kept. By the candle-light the young face looked paler and older; no tinge of red had come to replace the brown colouring washed away in her illness. Honor was changed; was it merely that she was growing into a woman? Though she could not express it in words, Mrs Joad felt the strange elusive quality in the girl that had baffled every one from Mr Rivers to Farmer Lapworth. Dutiful, affectionate, transparently simple as she appeared to be, there was something about Honor that was still as unknown to the kind old woman as on the day when first they met.

"Did you have an agreeable walk with the children this morning, my love?"

"Not so agreeable as usual, ma'am. We met Miss Atwood——"

"And she made herself uncivil to you, no doubt?"

"She seemed to be attempting it, ma'am," said Honor with a look of frank puzzlement into Mrs Joad's face, "and Miss Cope evidently thought so, and asked me what I had done to offend her; I could not imagine what it was."

"La, child, you're as innocent as a baby!" cried Mrs Joad. "She knows her brother wants to marry you."

"Mr Atwood? Oh no, ma'am." Honor dropped the knitting in her dismay.

"Of course he does. Any one can see it, if Miss Atwood can. Has he never said anything to you?"

"No, ma'am." Honor was visibly searching her

memory. "He never speaks to me unless you are by."

"What was he saying to you at Mrs Wellman's card-party last week, when he sat by you for upwards of half an hour?" demanded Mrs Joad.

"Nothing, ma'am, that was at all interesting. He wanted to know whether I was like all young ladies, and thought that no coat but a scarlet one went well with my gown."

"And what did you say to that?"

"I said that a scarlet coat would not go well with my red hair, however it might suit my gown!"

"And then?"

"Then he asked me what were my favourite colours, and he wanted to know whether I thought he should have his new dinner service blue or pink. I told him that blue would be prettier for summer, and pink for winter, and he said in that case he would have both, though it was a sad extravagance. Then Miss Wellman came up to ask me to sing."

"And you mean to say that you never caught his meaning? If he had gone half so far with either of the Miss Wellmans, or the Dean's nieces, their banns would have been cried by now."

"Oh, ma'am, I could not marry him. I could not marry any one!" There was a note in the voice that Mrs Joad uneasily recognised as something more than girlish protest, though she would not acknowledge it.

"Fiddlesticks, my dear! all young misses say the same, till their time comes. What is it, Stubbs?"

"Mrs Dalton to wait upon you, ma'am."

"Shall I go down to her?"

"No, my love, hers is not a business for a young lady. She has had her troubles, poor thing, and—I

daresay I should have done the same myself. I will see her in the servants' hall, Stubbs, and pray make up the fire before you go down; unless the room is kept warm, Pug will feel it."

When Stubbs closed the door behind his mistress, Honor slipped between the red velvet curtains and stood in the bow-window looking out upon the night. The atmosphere of the room, shut up all day and heated almost to the pitch of a furnace by continually stoking the fire, was stifling her; beyond the curtains little breaths of fresh air came through the ill-fitting window frames, and she drew it into her lungs with relief. She was restless and uneasy, more restless than at the convent, for with returning strength had come the power to think and feel.

Though much of the past was a dream, the future was beginning to trouble her. At any moment Mrs Joad might weary of her company, and then where should she go? Mr Atwood might offer a solution of the difficulty, but though she believed herself to be free, Honor could not face marriage with him. What was she to do? Should she find some other old lady, and sort her wools, pick up her stitches, run her errands, and care for her pets, in exchange for food and a roof over her head?

The rain was gone, the clouds were parted, and the red-tiled pointed roofs of the opposite house sparkled on their various levels with the coming frost under the starlight. Honor looked out and longed to be away from the hot room in the keen cold air.

Often and often before her birth did Adrian Basset torment his wife by telling her that once upon a time a Basset married a gipsy lass, and that the wandering blood would run in their descendants until the end of

the world. It might be the gipsy blood that stirred within Honor as she leaned against the window-frame, giving her a wild longing for open spaces, for the hollow sounds of the night, for the cry of the wind in the pine-trees.

The Close lay hushed, with a sort of deliberate self-conscious stillness, like that of the cathedral congregation when the sermon began. Society in Osmundsbury retired early, unless there were some reason for sitting up, such as a dinner or a card-party. All the Close gates were locked and barred, and no one could go in or out except by that in the north-west corner, where a deaf and surly old janitor sat in his little room under the archway.

A step was ringing along the flagstones; Honor looked out of the west side of the bow-window, saw a tall figure wrapped in a long coat, and suddenly felt her heart leap. No, it could not be he; Mrs Joad had said nothing of expecting him, and it always took her at least three days of happy fussiness to prepare for his visits. He always trod with the firm, light step of a man who was bred among hills and crags; he would never drag one foot after the other as this man did, as if he were almost too weary and heart-sick to move at all. Besides, this man carried one arm in a sling. Yet the figure was strangely like that which she had not seen for over three months. As he was about to pass under the bow-window a light fell on his face from the lantern over the gate of the opposite house, and Honor saw that it was Claud Fenwick.

At the sight she forgot everything, except that Stubbs was used to lock the garden doors as nine o'clock struck, and if any one should knock, would wait to the last moment in the hope that the visitor might



go away and save him the trouble of opening. Down the narrow staircase she ran into the hall, out into the garden. Claud, who had nerved himself to await Stubbs' convenience, was surprised by hearing the bolts creak in their hinges before the last echo of the bell ceased quivering. The door was flung open, and there, on the flagged path, was the lady of his dream.

"You here?" It was all that he could say. Once more, as when she came to him in his darkest hour, he was tongue-tied and could only look. He dared not touch her with so much as a finger lest she should prove indeed a dream and melt away before his eyes.

"You are hurt, you are ill——"

"It is nothing." If he stretched out his hand he might touch a fold of her dress without her knowing it.

"What it it? Ah!"

As, like one spellbound, he moved forward, shutting the heavy wooden door behind him, his foot slipped on the step leading down to the path, and Honor with a little cry put out her hands as if to shield the wounded arm from contact with a rose-bush.

"My dear, my dear——" His one hand was clasping both hers. "You came to me then, when I was in despair—you have come to me again. Promise me that you will never go away. I cannot live without you."

"I do not think I want to go away," Honor confessed, making no attempt to free herself.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

"I DON'T understand at all how your arm came to be broken," said Mrs Joad. She was sitting opposite to Claud, who was established in the big arm-chair by the dining-room fire, with a little table at his side, submitting to eat his supper on condition that Honor cut it up for him. "Was it because you had finished your work?"

"Not exactly," said Claud, with a twist of the mouth; "my work has been finished for me."

"Dear me! my dear Claud, that sounds just as if you were an old woman like me. There's Honor has finished the elephant since you were here. You will see how well it looks to-morrow. I am having it made into a footstool after all, not a chair."

"I am afraid that even Honor would not be able to make anything so useful out of my unfinished work. The Sussex yokels who took upon themselves to interfere in it were very thorough in their operations."

"What do you mean?"

"It was my own fault," said Claud, in the hard, light tone that covers bitterness of soul; "I knew that the country people had some idea in their thick skulls that I was a Frenchman, and therefore in league with

Bonaparte; but I never troubled my head about what the *canaille* thought of me. Unhappily, a week ago, there were false alarms of a landing, and when the brutes had drowned what little wits they had in muddy beer, some tavern orator gave them the idea that I used the Folly as a store for arms and ammunition for the French. Forthwith, off they go, batter down the door——”

“Were you there?”

“I was,” said Claud grimly, “and, thick as their skulls are, I managed to break several before my arm was broken. But their skulls will mend, I fear, and my instruments are past mending, so they have the laugh of me after all. They destroyed all my notes and papers, some that I shall never be able to replace.”

“The wretches! I hope they will be hanged!” cried Mrs Joad vindictively. Honor, saying nothing, stroked the clenched hand on his knee.

“I can hold out no hope of that, Cousin Louisa. So far the village constables have found themselves unable to arrest any one but the village idiot, who was found sleeping among the ruins next day. I have received a friendly caution that in the present state of public feeling it is not wise for me to show myself too much in the neighbourhood. So I came to ask my kind cousin whether she was brave enough to give me shelter. Perhaps the good folk of Sussex may be less nervous when they realise that Bonaparte has no longer a fleet to bring him over here.”

“It would serve them right if he came,” said Cousin Louisa, pouring out another glass of port. “Yes, my dear, you must drink it, and then you must go to bed and stay there, and Mr Cantlie can come round and

see you in the morning, and then perhaps he won't be affronted if I ask him to take a look at Pug."

"Pug is welcome to all his attention so far as I am concerned," said Claud in a more natural tone, "or perhaps Honor will see Mr Cantlie. If she is going to be responsible for me, she may as well begin at once."

"I did think Honor was looking pale," said Mrs Joad, peering through her spectacles, "but she has quite a colour to-night. Here is Stubbs; he will help you get into bed, and I shall come in the morning to see how you are."

All Mrs Joad's efforts next day could do no more than keep Fenwick in bed for the early part of the morning; after breakfast he insisted upon getting up. Mr Cantlie found his patient in considerable pain and a certain amount of fever, and interdicted all visitors or excitement of any kind, greatly to the disappointment of the ladies of the Close, young and old, who all heard some version of his accident before dinner-time, and came to inquire for Mrs Joad. They were obliged to go away again no wiser than they came, for Stubbs did not encourage curiosity, and would vouchsafe only the information that his mistress was too busy with Mr Fenwick to be able to see any company. The second of the Dean's nieces, as she walked home, caught a glimpse of Honor's curls through the bow-window, and supposed that the red-headed creature—what was her name?—was helping Mrs Joad to nurse the invalid.

Claud, lying on the sofa, with Honor to sit by him, read to him, sing to him, was happier than he could have thought possible, even with his life's work destroyed past hope of recovery.

"You will begin again when you are stronger,"



Honor told him. "It is not as if you had lost all your time; you have found out a great deal since you began."

"You will bring me luck," he vowed, and it seemed that he spoke truly when the post brought a letter from Mr Pringle. Coal had been discovered on some land inherited by Fenwick from his grandmother, and supposed to be of so little value that no purchaser could be found for it when Guesthwaite was sold.

"At least you will not have to wash your own dishes and cook your own dinner," said Fenwick, after reading the letter to Honor. "I was ashamed when I remembered how little I had to offer you."

"But what does that matter?" asked Honor. "It is not as if I were used to being rich. They would never let me have any money, even when they said that it was mine."

Claud, puzzled, might have asked for an explanation, but at this moment Mrs Joad, who had been counting her stitches perseveringly for the last five minutes, and making the number vary with each repetition, lifted her head from her stocking to ask a question. Had Claud made up his mind where they were going to live? She supposed that he would not care to buy back Guesthwaite, even if it turned out that he could afford it. Warned by his sudden frown and tightening of his lips, she hurried on—what did he think of buying quite a small property near Osmundsbury? She understood that one or two were coming into the market. The people here were not so stupid, and would never dream of taking him for a Frenchman; they had only to look at him to see that he was not yellow and wrinkled like poor Monsieur Lafitte.

"Very true," said Claud solemnly; "neither do I carry a fiddle under my arm."

"But you do play the fiddle," said Mrs Joad, shaking her head sadly; "at least you used to play it, I remember. Perhaps you had better not say anything about that for the present."

"Not unless I am reduced to play it for a livelihood, Cousin Louisa. If this coal deceives our hopes, I can always tramp the roads with my fiddle. How would you like it, Honor?"

Honor clapped her hands. "To wander all over the world with you—to sleep in a different place every night—to follow the sun——"

"My dear, how can you say such a thing!" cried Mrs Joad, thoroughly roused. "Sleep in a different place every night, indeed! pray, how are you to be sure that the sheets are aired?"

"Sheets! what could we do with sheets?" asked Claud, stretching himself out on the sofa with a lazy smile of amusement. "Freshly pulled heather, or young bracken tops, for a bed, and the running stream to sing a lullaby, and the moon and stars overhead instead of a chandelier."

"Oh, let us go!" cried Honor with shining eyes.

"Much good will the moon do you when you have caught your death of cold," said Mrs Joad indignantly. "It really is not right to talk such nonsense, Claud."

Claud shut his eyes and languidly observed that if he were contradicted he should probably be much more feverish by nightfall. Then, seeing Mrs Joad really distressed, he kissed her hand, and promised to interview the house-agent as soon as Mr Cantlie would allow him.

The wedding was to take place in a month's time. Claud was impatient, and Mrs Joad's first idea, that he

might wait until his arm healed, proved to be out of the question. "A fracture like that will not heal in seven days, nor yet in seven weeks," said Mr Cantlie severely. "I assure you, madam, that Mr Fenwick may think himself very fortunate in keeping his arm after it had sustained such injuries, and after travelling down here when he was in a high fever."

"Do you think it will excite him too much to be married?" asked Mrs Joad.

"Provided that—er—the marriage ceremony is not made—er—too fatiguing," replied Mr Cantlie, rubbing the gold head of his cane with his forefinger, "we need not anticipate any harm to my patient." Then, with a twinkle in his eye that showed him to be human, he added, "It is quite evident that he needs some one to take care of him, and Miss Lester, if I may say so, strikes me as a young lady of great good sense and a cheerful disposition—exactly what he requires to make him healthy and happy."

"If Honor does not make me happy, I shall always have the consolation of knowing that I took her in obedience to your doctor's prescription," said Claud when Mrs Joad repeated these remarks.

"My dear Claud, I don't think you need be afraid of that," remonstrated his cousin. "After living with her for nine months I should be sure to have noticed her faults, if she had any—and really she has none, except to run out in the garden in her thin satin slippers, and I am sure she will never let you do that. Of course, I looked for you to make a good match, I don't deny it; but after all, if you had married a young lady of fortune and family, she might not have troubled herself about a silly old woman, and I know

that the dear child will always be good to me. No Claud, my dear, you really must not get up, not even to kiss me, though I love you to do it. Besides, any one can see that she comes of good family; I wonder—but perhaps it is wiser to ask her no questions.”

“Certainly not,” said Claud with decision. “Honor is Honor, whoever her parents may have been, and that is enough for me.”

Thanks to Mr Cantlie’s advice, Mrs Joad was able to tell the Close that the wedding was to be absolutely private, owing to the bridegroom’s accident, and that no invitations at all would be issued. “Really, it is not altogether unlucky that poor Claud’s arm was broken, if he gets the use of it again,” she said to herself. “It would have been so difficult to explain why none of Honor’s relations were present at the ceremony.”

Mr Cantlie proved useful in another way, by having a mother-in-law who was going to spend the winter with her daughter at Cheltenham, and would be very glad to let her house, about two miles out of Osmundsbury, to a careful tenant. Mrs Joad went to examine the house, and pronounced it clean and comfortable, quite a possible abode until Claud would be able to find a property in the neighbourhood. A long journey in winter was not agreeable, and it would be better for Claud to spend his honeymoon in a warm, well-furnished house, within reach of surgeon and apothecary, than wandering about the country. “And as for your sleeping in cold water, or any nonsense of that kind——”

“Dear Cousin Louisa, all I said was that I would pitch my tent beside a running stream——”

“And suppose it rained in the night, and the stream



overflowed," said Mrs Joad triumphantly. "You would be in cold water, and Mr Cantlie says it is positively a suicidal notion."

"Very well," said Claud with affected meekness. "I have a few shillings in my pocket, and Honor may be able to make them last, so that we need not go tramping before the summer."

"My dear boy, I wish I could do more for you," sighed Mrs Joad; "I should like to make you my heir, but Mr Woodhead tied up all his money, so that I can't spend a shilling beyond the income, and after my death it all goes back to his family; and poor Mr Joad was not nearly so well off as he thought himself—though I am sure I have nothing to complain of, and he did leave some of it in my power."

"If you talk like that you will make me very unhappy, Cousin Louisa. You know——"

"My dear, of course I know you're not after my money, but I wish there was more that you could have. The difficulty is to get you to take anything."

"I am sure we are kindly allowing you to give us everything we want, from house linen to Honor's trousseau."

"Well, my dear, I owe it to her. I only wish I were going to give her a wedding-dress; but perhaps, as no one will be there to see, it is better for her to be married in her riding-habit—I was married to Mr Joad in my riding-habit, I remember, and a great waste of money it was, for I never got on horseback again after I married him; but you are going to teach Honor to ride, so she will have a chance of wearing out hers."

"There is only one thing," pursued Mrs Joad, settling down in her chair after an interlude spent in

trying to induce Pug not to lie on the sofa cushions, "it is a pity that Honor has not been married before."

Claud sat bolt upright in his astonishment.

"Do lie down again, my dear; you may stare at me, but it is quite true. Young ladies are apt to be romantic and fanciful, and they don't really know what to expect of a man; now when once you have been married you know that you can't have what you would like. Mr Woodhead was very trying, but I shall always be thankful for the years I lived with him; if it were not for him I dare say I should have turned up my nose at my dear old Mr Joad, who was kindness itself, just because he had—well, a waistcoat, my dear, and suffered from asthma. And perhaps, if I had been married to some one else before Mr Woodhead married me, I should have understood better what would be likely to tease him."

"I am afraid I can't wait until some one breaks in Honor for me," said Claud, getting off the sofa. "He might not be so obliging as to die as soon as her education was finished. So I shall go and see Mr Patten."

"And be sure to say that the fires must be lighted the day before," called Mrs Joad after him, "or we shall all catch cold."

As it would be difficult for the Close to ignore a wedding that took place in front of their windows, it had been decided that Claud and Honor should be married, not in the Cathedral, but in St Thomas's Church, in the town.

As Claud went out Honor was coming in from a visit to the dressmaker. The maid who had gone with her discreetly hurried to the back door when she saw Mr Fenwick at the gate.

"Are your gowns nearly done? Cousin Louisa is breaking her heart because she cannot dress you out in white satin and lace."

"I detest white satin," said Honor quite sharply.

"You gipsy! do you want a scarlet petticoat and a string of gold coins round your neck?"

"No, I should like a brown petticoat, the colour of the bracken in autumn, and a purple gown."

"And I should like to marry you in them before the face of the Bishop, the Dean and the Chapter. I must go now, but I will be back very shortly; it will not take long to settle with Mr Patten."

He had passed through the wicket-gate before turning back to ask—

"You have no other Christian name but Honor?"

"No; and"—Honor, standing in the gateway, spoke without looking up—"my name is not really Lester. My father's name was Basset—Adrian Basset."

A flood of pity and tenderness came over him for the child who seemed overcome with shame for her parents' sin.

"You will have to be married as Miss Lester, as you have always been called Miss Lester here." It would be too brutal for him to tell her that an unlawful child could not claim her father's name. "But I will explain everything to Mr Patten if there is any difficulty. Unless he gives out the banns more distinctly than is usual in the Cathedral, you might call yourself by any name and none of the congregation would be the wiser."

"Claud,"—Honor still looked down at a broken snail-shell on the path—"I did tell you—you know—it would not prevent your marrying me?"

"My heart's dearest, you must never speak of that

again. How could it prevent our marriage? You are mine, and I am yours, and that is all that matters."

"You are sure?"

"So sure that I shall be angry if ever you say another word about it."

He saw the smile come back into her eyes before he left her to keep his appointment with Mr Patten.

On the way he puzzled over a half-lost memory; the name of Basset recalled something, but he could not tell when or where he had heard it before. It was not until the interview was nearly at an end that he was given the clue.

"All shall be as you wish, my dear sir," said little Mr Patten, blinking amiably through his large spectacles. "I understand you have rented a room in the parish—quite right. I need not tell you how I feel honoured by being chosen to perform the ceremony. Damp? Mrs Joad's solicitude does credit to her head and heart, but pray assure her that she will find the church quite warm if the marriage takes place on a Tuesday; the church will have been open for Sunday, and we will keep the fires going through the Monday. I always recommend the beginning of the week for weddings on that account. I think that is all—you have given me the particulars in this paper? Yes—most thoughtful. I note that your bride has the same remarkable Christian name as a young lady at whose wedding I had the honour of being present, rather more than a year ago—Miss Honor Basset. I was staying in London with some relatives who received an invitation, and they were so good as to take me with them. I remember the name; it struck me particularly at the time."

"A fashionable wedding?"



"Yes; a fine sight, so every one said, though I was not able to judge. I am miserably short-sighted, and could distinguish nothing. The bride was covered with such a thick veil that she was invisible to most of the company, as well as myself. Poor young lady! I fear the prospect in front of her was not what could be wished."

"Indeed?"

"She was no more than a child, and it was said, I hope unjustly, that her guardian forced her into the marriage. The bridegroom, I deeply regret to say, was not in a state befitting the occasion. Distressing—most distressing."

"Who was the bridegroom?"

"His name? I shall have it in a moment—not Mender—no—Mending—I remember—Mendip, it was. I hope he has learnt better. Good day, sir, I think I may promise that all the arrangements will be to your satisfaction."

As he went back to the Close, Fenwick fitted the pieces of the puzzle together in his mind. He remembered an afternoon in Sussex, in the September of the previous year, when Lady Elystan, newly arrived from London, had ridden over the heath and made him walk at her side, saying, "I am losing all my beaux, so I cannot afford to let you off; Yetholm goes abroad next week, and Sir Charles Mendip is marrying Miss Basset to-day."

The unfortunate bride must be akin to Honor; it was not possible that there could be two girls with the same uncommon Christian name, one a Miss Basset, the other the daughter of a Basset, who were not related to each other. Perhaps it was on account of the other Honor that his Honor had been cast out

upon the world by her kinsfolk. He felt a momentary pang of jealousy for her, then laughed at himself; without conceit or presumption, he might be sure that his Honor would be happier with him than her half-sister or cousin could be with Sir Charles Mendip.

Should he say anything about the matter to Honor? Fenwick decided that it was unnecessary. Lady Mendip and his wife would move in such different spheres that they very likely might never meet. If ever there seemed to be any chance of an encounter, he might speak, but for the present it would be wiser not to revive old memories.

The cold was bitter, and his left hand and arm were numb in the sling. As he rubbed the dead fingers with his other hand, he looked down at the signet ring, worn by his father and grandfather before him. The Fenwicks of Guesthwaite, for generation after generation, had prided themselves upon their unstained faith and their unstained coat. His father had forsaken the faith; Guesthwaite had passed into other hands; nothing was left to him save the blazon of his house, and he was about to deface it by marrying a bastard.

What did it matter? As he came into the garden he could hear a voice ringing through the open hall door—

"Serai-je nonnette? Je crois que non!  
Derrière chez mon pere,  
Il est un bois taillis."

Honor was pouring out her heart in the song he had taught her. Claud, listening, knew that he spoke truly that morning when he told her that her birth made no difference.

She, on her side, was at last confident that no ghost from her past need trouble their joy. His assurance ended all fears and misgivings. She felt none during the three following weeks, spent by Mrs Joad in incoherent preparations, and by Claud in asserting all his privileges as lover and invalid.

The morning of the wedding-day was dull and lowering; the washing hung to dry from the windows of the tumble-down houses overlooking St Thomas's Churchyard flapped to and fro in a gusty wind.

Within, the church was dank in spite of the warming influences of Sunday, and so dark that Claud was unable to beguile his time of waiting by a study of the grotesque little figures emerging from cocoon-like winding-sheets in the fresco of the Last Judgment over the chancel arch.

But the sun broke through grey rain-clouds for a moment, to cast a gleam upon Honor's curls as she came into the church; and when Claud set the ring upon her finger, there was no thought of that other gold ring which lay buried at the foot of a beech-tree in a Sussex wood.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

LOOKING back in after life upon the fortnight which followed his marriage, Claud Fenwick felt as if he must have known, even then, that those days were too good to last, that their dreamlike happiness must dissolve, like a dream, at the instant when it was most exquisite. Yet, search his memory as he would, he could recall no forebodings. The honeymoon was unclouded ; the two forgot the past, and took no thought for the future, living in the present moment as whole-heartedly as two children. Although there was really nothing to do, the days passed all too swiftly. Honor's riding lessons were not to begin till Claud fully recovered the use of his arm, but they walked out whenever the wintry weather was favourable. They went to look at the houses recommended by the agent. They walked into Osmundsbury one morning, to show themselves to Mrs Joad, putting her into great perplexity as to whether she ought to be more scandalised than delighted, or more delighted than scandalised.

"My dears, you really ought not to be seen in public, you know, for the present. Next week, perhaps, Honor may be at home to receive visits, and after that you might drive here, and return some of them ; but



to-day—I really hope nobody saw you come in, it might give rise to remark. My love, I was longing for you to come; the house does not seem the same without you, and Pug has been moping sadly. My dear Claud, pray don't sit in the window,—any one going through the Close could see you!—let me draw your chair up to the fire. No, you really must not do it with that arm."

Claud wanted to know how they were to get home, and Mrs Joad seriously balanced whether they should go at once in a chaise from the "White Hart," with the blinds drawn, or wait until dusk and go out by the back door on foot.

"As your back door merely opens into the Close, a few yards below the front door, it is not very useful for purposes of evasion, Cousin Louisa. I am surprised you did not arrange something better when you took the house."

"Well, my dear, I never thought of it," said Mrs Joad, wrinkling her forehead over her spectacles, "but, as you say, it is not a convenient arrangement. Of course, no one would look for you to come out by the back door, but you never know what your neighbours may happen to see, especially in the dark."

"True," said Claud very gravely. "Perhaps it would be better if we were to put on some disguise. If Honor wore my coat, and I borrowed your velvet pelisse, we could improvise masks—cut them out of the tablecloth perhaps, or——"

"My dear Claud, I'll have no such things going in or out of my house," exclaimed Mrs Joad indignantly. "Masks, indeed! It was only last Sunday that the Dean was preaching on the licentious manners of our time, especially those introduced from France, and he

said some very severe things about masked balls. There is to be a masked ball at the Castle, you know——” Here Mrs Joad was taken with a violent fit of sneezing.

“Would you like to go to a masked ball?” Claud asked of Honor, while his cousin tried to find her handkerchief.

“I don’t know,” said Honor thoughtfully; “they were asked to a masked ball when I was in Brunswick Square, but Mr Rivers said it was quite impossible for a young lady in my situation to go, and I must wait until I was married. But he said that about everything. It seems odd that being married should make so much difference. He used to say that as there was so little time—I think you put it behind the cushion, Cousin Louisa.”

“I’m sure you would have no wish to go to any such thing, if you had heard the Dean,” pursued Mrs Joad, regaining utterance. “The ball at the Castle is to be next week, as I say, and no one from the Close has been invited,—not that the Dean would have gone in any case, but I suppose no one likes to be denied the chance of saying no, to show they are better than other people. If he saw masks coming out of my house he might think I was going to the ball, and his feelings would be hurt.”

When she discovered that both Claud and Honor were laughing, Mrs Joad laughed too, and she even gained courage to come down to the gate and wave to them as they walked away in the starlight, after dining with her. Claud was so busy teaching Honor to look at the stars that he forgot to ask her any questions about Mr Rivers, as he half intended to do.

There was little room in his thoughts for anything save Honor herself. At every moment he seemed to

discover something new in her. A look, a turn of the head, a chance word, a note in her voice, would suggest a side of her nature as yet unknown to him. Now grave, now bubbling over with merriment, at one moment a woman looked out of the hazel eyes, at another a child or an elf. He sometimes thought of the story his mother used to tell him in the winter evenings at Guesthwaite of the knight who found a fay asleep in the wild wood, and brought her home.

Like the knight, he set himself to learn the fairy ways and the fairy speech, believing that he knew the spell to keep her with him. As he watched Honor flitting about the house and garden, or as they sat side by side in the firelight, he fancied that the knight's fairy bride must have had just that smile, half shy, half tender, that very gleam in her hazel eyes, that same trick of suddenly gliding out of his reach when he thought to hold her.

No fear or misgiving touched him, even when he remembered the end of the story, how the knight offended his bride, so that she vanished from him, and how he wandered over hills and through forests for many years seeking her, but never to behold her till he grew old and thin as a withered leaf, and one morning his dead body was found lying beneath a hawthorn tree, and none could say whether the drops upon his face were dew or the tears of his lost bride.

The only flaw in the honeymoon was the state of Claud's arm, which did not mend as quickly as it ought. Sometimes it gave him acute pain; more often it was troublesome enough to make an excuse for demanding something that he wanted of Honor.

It was a dull wet day, with occasional gusts of wind, and Honor pronounced it too bad for walking.

Claud bade her not talk nonsense, after running into the garden to hang up a cocoanut for the birds, and coming in with the raindrops sparkling on her bare head. She reminded him of Dr Cantlie's warning that he was not to go out in the damp and risk setting up rheumatism in the injured arm, and Claud argued for some time, for the pleasure of being coaxed and petted into reasonableness. At last he yielded, on condition that he was to be amused; Honor must put on the shoes with his mother's diamond buckles and dance for him.

Sitting by the piano in the drawing-room, thrumming a few chords with his one hand, he could look through the open doorway into the hall and watch her stepping, solemn and stately as a peacock, in the *Menuet de la cour* learned at her dancing-class, bowing, sliding, sinking down on the polished boards with a sweep that suggested hoops and a train. A moment afterwards, her feet were moving quickly up and down in a morris dance, the diamond buckles twinkling in time to the tune that she whistled. Faster and faster went the feet, brighter and brighter flashed the diamonds, till with a last twirl of arms and skirts, she was in the drawing-room and sank on a low stool at Claud's side.

"Thank you, sweetheart. Some day you shall have a satin gown, and a hoop, and a powdered head, and a whole forest of feathers in it, and dance at Court."

"I do not wish to dance at Court," said Honor, fanning herself with a sheet of music. "The best place of all for dancing that I have ever known was a fairy ring in the meadow by the church at Witham. I used to dance there, whenever I could, just as it was growing dusk; I always hoped that the fairies would come out



and dance with me. Once a squirrel sat in the tree and looked at me ; I was quite sure that it was a fairy. It began to come down the tree, and I waited to see it come into the ring and call the others—and then, all at once, it scampered away, and there were Miss Lester and Nurse, who had come to look for me ! Nurse said I must never go into the ring again, or the fairies would carry me off : I should have liked that. But Miss Lester said that it was most unseemly for a young gentlewoman to be capering about for all eyes to see, and next day she made me write a copy ten times over, ‘Want of Decency is Want of Sense,’ and said that I should write it twenty times if I danced in the field again.”

“Poor little Ariel ! Was that her way of shutting you up in the split pine ?”

“Are you going to read me more about Ariel and the island,” asked Honor eagerly.

“If you are very good, perhaps I will. Did you never read about him before ?”

“Miss Lester had only one volume of Shakespeare, and she would not let me read all of that.”

“You must learn Ariel’s songs. Did your music-master ever give them to you ?”

As he struck the opening chords of “Full Fathoms Five,” the servant came in with a letter for Mrs Fenwick.

“From Reverend Mother,” she announced, displaying the sheet with the “Vive Jésus !” written in large characters at the top, and the cross before the signature. “I wrote to tell her, and she hopes we may be happy. Sœur Marie Josephe has been in bed ever since *le jour des morts*, and Sœur Agathe sprained her knee going into the laundry, and is still lame. The

robin is quite well, and brought up a family in the garden in the summer. Sœur Eulalie has had much trouble with her eyes. Sœur Monique has lost two of her teeth—what a pity! she had so few,—and the cat was caught in a trap, and is getting well again. Part of the chimney in the parlour fell down last month, but it has been mended without their having to pay anything for it. Reverend Mother hopes you will not let me forget my French or my French friends. It is not easy to read; she says her hand was so covered with *engelures* that she could hardly hold the pen. I wonder whether they can afford to have more fires now that they have more sisters.”

Claud began to feel himself neglected, and contrived an uneasy movement of the arm and a slight murmur which did not fail of their effect.

“Oh, my dear, is the pain coming on again? is it the cramp in your hand?”

“It is nothing,” said Claud, speaking the truth with such skill as to make her believe it a heroic fiction. “It is only a little discomfort. Perhaps if you did not mind rubbing my hand, very gently——”

Before the words were out of his mouth, he had what he wanted; Reverend Mother’s letter fell on the carpet, unheeded; both Honor’s hands were very busy with his, and Honor’s eyes were looking up at him, full of compassion and tenderness. “The poor hand is so cold; do you think these bandages are pulled too tightly?”

“If it would not trouble you to alter them,” suggested Claud, with a pathetic sigh.

“If you talk about trouble, I shall send you into Osmundsbury to have them altered by Dr Cantlie,” said Honor, winding the bandages with her light, firm touch. “Did you hear him say yesterday that I was

getting quite a pretty notion of bandaging for a young lady—"I should say, a young matron, madam."

"What a mimic you are!" Claud allowed himself to smile. "Yes, that is better. Thank you, *ma mie*."

"Your fingers are swollen; do you think you ought to wear that ring. It looks as if it were hindering the circulation."

"I know where you learned that, madam; you heard that pompous prig say so on his last visit."

"But, Claud, I am sure the ring is too tight. Do pray take it off and put it on your other hand."

Claud pulled at the heavy signet-ring on his little finger. "It is tighter than I thought—it must be a good pull. Stop your ears, my sweet, if you do not want to hear what I shall say when it comes off! There!"

"It was hurting you." Honor's soft lips touched his hand.

"But what am I to do with it?" asked Claud after an interlude. "I can't wear it on my right hand. It will not go upon any finger."

"What makes your right hand so much larger than your left?"

"Fencing, I suppose. At one time I had always a foil in my hand at odd moments. Well, then, you must keep the ring for me, till I can wear it again, though it is a world too wide for your little fingers."

"I am afraid it may fall off." Honor displayed her hand with the ring twirling upon the middle finger. "I will put it on my chain."

"Safer so. Your wedding-ring is too large, too; you will lose that unless you are very careful."

"Cousin Louisa was particularly anxious that I should have it much larger than I needed. She said

she found it so inconvenient when she outgrew her wedding-ring."

"We will look in my mother's jewel-case for a ring that you can wear as a guard."

"I like this ring better than any; I wish my hand were big enough to fit it," said Honor, making the signet-ring run up and down her chain. "Is this your coat of arms?"

"Azure, a moon decrescent, proper—argent, five crosses gules. One of my ancestors was in the rising in the north in Queen Elizabeth's time, whereby he lost his property and nearly lost his head, but gave his descendants the right to quarter five crosses in memory of the Five Wounds on his banner. The line ended in a daughter who married my grandfather."

Honor sat silent, playing with the ring. Claud was struck by the serious look on her face.

"What is it, *mon cœur*? Are you thinking how you may get rid of your wedding-ring, and fly back to your Somersetshire fairies?"

"I was wondering"—the words came very slowly; Honor ceased to play with the ring, and sat with hands folded one over the other, looking down on the ground,—"I was wondering whether any one has found my old wedding-ring."

"Your old wedding-ring?" Claud was lazily surprised. "Was it an old family ring? Did it belong to your mother—to one of your relatives?"

"No, it was really quite a new wedding-ring. I think it came from Bond Street," said Honor, with the strained look that generally passed over her face when she tried to recall anything that happened after she left Witham. "Yes, I am sure that when Mr Rivers was driving out with Jane and me, the week



before the wedding, he pointed to a shop and said, 'That is where the happy bridegroom will go to-morrow to buy the wedding-ring.'

"What bridegroom? What wedding? I do not understand." Claud suddenly rose to his feet.

"My wedding with Sir Charles Mendip," answered Honor, picking Reverend Mother's letter off the carpet and folding it neatly.

Surprised by his exclamation, she looked up to see bewilderment and dismay struggling together in his face.

"What is the matter?" she asked, springing up in her turn. "Is it the pain again? Will you lie down and let me send for Dr. Cantlie?"

"D——n Dr. Cantlie!" escaped from Claud, and then he mastered himself. "It is not my arm—it is that I do not understand about—your wedding-ring."

"I took it off and buried it under a tree in the wood when I ran away from him," said Honor in a matter-of-fact voice, "and I wonder whether any one has found it. Of course, as it was not a real marriage——"

She broke off as Claud's one hand gripped her arm. But for her pride she could have screamed with fear and bewilderment. Claud's face was deadly pale, his eyes burning, and he spoke very fast, under his breath, as if he could not trust his own voice.

"Honor, tell me what you mean. What was this marriage?"

"But I told you of it, long ago," she pleaded, trying to smile up in his face in spite of the awful dread that he must be mad. "I told you when first—you found me. I was married to Sir Charles Mendip, and I ran away from him on the wedding-day, when we were

going down into Sussex. I told you about it, and you said it made no difference."

Claud staggered back against the wall, and drew his breath quickly two or three times. Then he came back to her side, and spoke gently and soothingly, as to a child or a sick person. "Forgive me, my sweet. You are tired, and I made you dance too long. Lie down here on the sofa and rest; do not try to talk. Shut your eyes, and sleep if you can."

"What are you going to do?" asked Honor, yielding to him out of sheer inability to understand what was in his mind.

"I will not go away. I shall sit at the writing-table, close to you, and write a note to Cousin Louisa. Do you think she would come out and stay with us for a few days? She must be very lonely without you, and it is some time to Christmas. If she came here she might see for herself whether she would prefer the guest-room in the old Manor-house, or the one at Lawnfield. Yes, lie still, my sweet; I will put this cushion under your head. Are your feet cold? Shall I ring for a shawl to put over them? No? Then go to sleep, and don't let the scratching of my pen disturb you."

Honor lay rigid, scarcely breathing, while the little gilt shepherdess on the clock on the mantelpiece went to and fro in her gilt swing for ten long minutes. At first she obediently shut her eyes; when she heard the pen at work she opened them and looked at Fenwick bending over his writing. His pale set face seemed not to belong to the happy lover who watched her dancing, and there were lines upon it that she vaguely remembered seeing when he came to the door of her

room at the convent, on the night when she was supposed to be dying.

"Claud, do you think I am going to be ill again?"

He was at her side in an instant.

"My sweet, no; I have tired you, and some of the bad dreams that you had when you were ill have come back. You must not think of them. They will go away. Cousin Louisa will come to take care of you."

"They are not dreams." Honor swung her feet off the sofa and sat up. "Claud, you must let me speak. See, my hands are quite cool, and so is my head; it is not the fever coming back. There is a question I must ask you."

Claud sat down on the sofa beside her. "What can be the need of that, my dear?"

"Before we were married, did I not ask you whether I had told you about myself when I was ill? and did you not tell me that you knew everything, and that it made no difference to us?"

"I did," he said, with the same air of trying to soothe her. "You told me who you were on that first day when I was allowed to see you in the parlour."

"I could not remember when I did it." The drawn, suffering look came back to Honor's face. "I tried to tell you and tell the sisters when I was ill, but I was never sure whether the words came right. One day, when I began to speak of it to Reverend Mother, she said that she knew—you had told her."

"Yes, I told her as soon as I knew it from you."

"What did you tell her?" asked Honor, looking him full in the face.

Claud hesitated. "My dear child, is it necessary for

me to repeat it? I told her that you were alone in the world—that Miss Lester's death had left you friendless——”

“Was that all?”

“That you—that there had been some informality about your parents' marriage, so that you could not claim relationship with any one——”

“But there was not.” Honor rose up from the sofa, flushed and indignant. “Was that what I said when I was ill? Claud, it is untrue—they were married in church——”

“Hush, my darling, you must not excite yourself. I must have misunderstood. I am very sorry. Lie down again and——”

“It was I who was not married in church.”

“Honor!” His cry rang through the room, making the strings of the piano and the glass panes of the little cabinet against the wall vibrate to a quivering echo.

“Mrs Rivers said that people of fashion were never married in church, and so they married me to Sir Charles in her drawing-room,” the girl went on, looking bravely into the white distorted face. “I was sure that it could not be a real marriage unless it was in church, and I never said ‘I will’ or anything else in the service, and I pulled off the ring as soon as I was out of the carriage.”

Claud paced up and down the room with bent head, then turned upon her with a relief so sudden that it made his tone rough. “Do not talk nonsense, Honor; try to collect yourself. Sir Charles Mendip married Honor Basset, an heiress, who may have been some relation of yours. His servants upset the carriage into



the river at Pulborough on the wedding-day, and she was drowned."

Honor almost smiled, like a child who finds a puzzle solved to its satisfaction. "So that was the reason why they never looked for me. I wondered. I was always afraid at first that Mr Rivers would send some one to find me and take me back."

"You mean that you have been telling me the truth—you are not mad?" Fenwick's tone was as hard as his words.

"I am not mad." Honor faced him, pale as he.

"Then when I thought that you meant to tell me that you were an illegitimate child you were trying to tell me that——"

"I thought I had told you that I had been married to Sir Charles, and had run away from him."

Fenwick stared at her despairingly, appealingly, then turned away his head. "You must excuse me," he said at last, formally, as if he were speaking to a stranger; "I must have air. I will come back."

With an abrupt movement he flung out of the room, and Honor heard the hall door shut behind him.

## CHAPTER XXV.

HONOR stood in the middle of the room, and the little gilt shepherdess swung to and fro, marking the flight of time that went unheeded.

She could neither think nor move. Something terrible had happened to her, and she could not understand what it was. Had she fallen down and hurt herself, and was that the reason why she felt stupefied? She could not tell; she was afraid to move hand or foot, lest she should find it out to be broken.

She stood there, drawing in her breath with long gasps. The exertion of breathing seemed to absorb her so that she was dead to all other sensations save that of watching her lace tucker rise and fall in a slow rhythm. After a while, she found herself counting the breaths—"One, two! one two!"—then she began to hear the tick of the gilt swing, and was disturbed to find that her breathing was not in time with it. She ought to breathe faster, but that made her feel giddy. She was afraid she might fall down. If it were a fall that had made her so stupid and helpless, she must be careful not to fall again. She would like to sit down, but the sofa was a terribly long way off; she did not

think she could reach it with the ends of her fingers, if she could make up her mind to stretch out one arm.

Something very dreadful had happened, and she could not understand what it was. She moved her eyes—all that she dared to move—very slowly round the room. Everything in it looked natural and harmless, from the Liverpool cups and saucers in the cabinet to the bunch of roses, an offering from Mr Patten, in the tall glass on the table. Yet over all lay the sense of some terror lurking in the background, ready to pounce upon her.

It brought back memories of her childhood when she used to dream that she was lying in her little bed beside the old walnut press which held Miss Lester's two gowns, and all at once a hideous face with some resemblance to the she-wolf in the big book of 'A Gentleman's Peregrinations in Rome' looked in at her through the little square window. Honor remembered how in her dream she would tell herself that she was asleep, and how she would strive and struggle to shut her eyes tightly and make the sign of the cross, knowing that if she could do this before the horror leaped in at the window she would break the dream and wake.

Perhaps she was dreaming now. She shut her eyes very tightly, and her fingers moved in the old familiar gesture learned from Nurse Tanner, to whom it had been handed down from forefathers who "sained themselves," despite the Reformation.

There was no change when she looked round her once more. Claud said something about bad dreams coming back; she wished she could be sure either that she was awake or that she was dreaming.

She twisted her fingers in the long gold watch-chain that had been one of Claud's presents to his bride, and

touched something heavy and gold; it was the signet-ring.

With it in her hand, memory began to come back, slowly, dimly, at first. In all innocence of deceit, she had deceived Claud, deceived Reverend Mother, deceived Cousin Louisa. She thought they knew everything, and they knew nothing after all. It was not true that her marriage made no difference to them. Claud had never dreamed of it, and he thought she was out of her mind when she spoke of her wedding-day.

Perhaps the sisters would not have taken her into the convent if they had known her for a runaway. Yes, she believed they would, for they were bound to help all who were in trouble. But perhaps Cousin Louisa would not have kept her in the house for nine months; perhaps Claud would not have married her.

The last thought came as a blow, and yet she saw confusedly she had been getting nearer to it at every stage, and that every other thought had led her to it. This was the horror that was lying in wait. She stared through the window, half expecting to see it in visible form gazing in upon her; but there was nothing to be seen save the heavy rain falling on the sodden flower-beds.

The hall door opened, and Fenwick came into the house. Honor could not make her throat utter a sound to call him, could not make her feet carry her to the door to beckon him to her. She stood motionless with eyes fixed on the doorway, and heard him go across the hall, upstairs to his room; then she turned back to the window.

It was there that Fenwick found her, some twenty minutes later, when he came into the drawing-room, dressed as for a journey.



"You must excuse my boots," he said, in a low even voice, with all the tone gone from it. "I did not like to ask you to come into the hall to speak to me; it is too cold."

Honor assented with a bend of her head, to all appearances calm and self-contained.

"I am obliged to go up to London immediately; I cannot tell how long I shall be away. You will find money in this pocket-book for the present; I will make arrangements to send you more if I am unable to return within a few days."

He laid the pocket-book on the table beside the vase of roses, Honor making no movement to receive it.

"Before I go, there are one or two points on which I must ask you to give me information." Then with a slight change in the tone, "Surely you had better sit down."

Honor shook her head. "I will tell you all I can."

"You were married, you say, to Sir Charles Mendip in Mrs Rivers's drawing-room. Who is this Mrs Rivers, and where does she live?"

"She was my father's cousin. She married a lawyer who lives in Brunswick Square. He was my guardian after the old lady left me her money."

"Did you make any protest against the marriage?"

"I told Mr Rivers that I did not want to marry any one, and he said I must be married. I said I did not want to marry Sir Charles, and he said that all had been arranged, and it was most suitable." Even at that moment, Fenwick could catch the echo of the lawyer's pompous tones in the girl's voice. "He said that if I were married he could allow me to have some of my own money, and I wanted money to send to Miss Lester"

Fenwick said something between his teeth which she did not understand. Though he stood opposite to her he never once looked at her face, but spoke with his eyes fixed at the level of the sofa between them.

"You left him on your wedding-day. How did you manage to do that?"

"He was drunk and asleep in the carriage, the servants were drunk, and I think asleep too. I got out of the carriage when it was going very slowly uphill, and hid behind a hedge."

"Then where did you go?"

"I walked along the road till I came to a farm, where they took me as a servant."

"In your wedding finery?" Something in his tone cut through the clouds in Honor's brain. She made a step forward from the window, her head uplifted, her eyes bright.

"The carriage broke down when we were passing through a village. We had to wait at the Inn. In the bedroom where they took me I found a bedgown and a petticoat. I put them on under my cloak. I wonder, was that stealing?" she added half to herself. "I never thought of that."

"How long did you stay at the farm?"

"I do not know—I can't remember. Do you remember when it was that you found me?"

Claud made no answer. He was breathing very quickly.

"It was on the morning of that day I left the farm. Madam Marsh wanted me to come to her house, and I would not go; she would have found out that I was not a village girl. I meant to walk to London, but it rained and I was wet and tired. I heard your servant go away, and I thought I would rest for a little while

beside your fire, and go on when my clothes were dry before you came back."

She spoke simply, quietly, without a trace of self-pity or of any other emotion. At first she had looked in Claud's face, but getting no response, she looked down at her own hands, hanging clasped against the skirt of her violet-coloured gown.

"I think that is all that I wished to know," said Fenwick slowly. "Thank you."

With a formal bow he turned to the door.

"You are not going out in this rain!" exclaimed Honor, forgetting everything but her anxiety for his health.

"I am afraid I cannot wait until it stops; it looks as if it meant to rain till nightfall, and I must get to London at once."

"Your arm——"

"I shall have no time to think of that at present. It will do very well." Then his voice softened for a moment. "You know there are excellent surgeons in London, of whom even Dr Cantlie would approve."

His hand was on the latch of the hall door when Honor, with a sudden impulse, hurried after him, holding out the signet with a mute question in eyes and gesture.

"What is it? My ring? did you not promise to keep it for me?"

"You wish me to keep it still?"

She thought he meant to take back the ring, but instead he took the hand that held it, and kissed it, once, twice, without a word. Then he opened the door and hurried out into the wind and the rain. Honor stood looking after him, until he was out of sight, but never once did he turn to wave her a farewell. Was it

fancy, or did she hear him say "*Adieu, mon cœur!*" as he went down the steps.

She stood at the open door, the wind ruffling her curls, the rain driving into her face, until one of the prim and elderly maids left by Dr Cantlie's mother-in-law came up to her.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but cook wishes to know whether she shall serve both the pheasants for dinner, or only one."

"Tell her she need not serve dinner. Mr Fenwick has gone to London."

"Lord, ma'am, you don't say so. But you'll be dining at home."

"I shall not want dinner."

"You'll let cook send you up something on a tray, surely, ma'am," began the woman, burning with curiosity. "Aren't you feeling well, ma'am? Dear, dear, but they do say that the weather——"

Honor turned away from her and wandered back into the drawing-room. She sat down on the sofa and drearily tried to think out the position. She had hurt Claud so grievously that he was going away from her. She did not know why he went; perhaps it was because he was so angry with her that he could not stay in the same house. Was it her fault? She meant to tell the truth; she thought he knew it. Had she been too ready to take it for granted that he understood? Or was this a punishment for having allowed Farmer Lapworth to believe her the girl sent by Mrs Cope?

Though Honor had learned much in the last fourteen months, still it did not occur to her that any punishment could be due for running away from Sir Charles Mendip.



Her fingers, moving aimlessly up and down, touched the knot of lace in the front of her dress. Pinned among the lace was a bunch of violets given to her by Claud in the morning. She wondered, dully, to find them not dead yet; she would have expected them to be withered and dry.

Everything seemed to have come to an end for her; she had nowhere to go, no friend to help her, no hope left. Claud was gone; it was no comfort to remember that he talked of coming back. He thought she had deceived him.

The winter afternoon closed in, and it was twilight in the drawing-room, where Honor lay with her face hidden against the end of the sofa.

There was a sound of wheels on the gravel outside, a double knock at the hall door. Honor sat up and pushed back the tangled curls from her white cheeks. This must be visitors come to pay the threatened call on the bride, though she could not imagine why they should chose an hour when every one in Osmundsbury would be at dinner.

"Honor, my love! Sitting in the dark! Poor child, you wanted to hide your eyes, but you'll have the candles lighted now. You won't mind an old woman seeing that you have been crying. I'm sure I don't blame you; it is too provoking that Claud should have to go up to town on business and leave you on your honeymoon. It's those rascally lawyers or that coal. Perhaps they have set something on fire with it. I thought he looked very uneasy when he ran in to ask me to go to you. I was so astonished I could hardly find a word to say to him. I can't think what you were at, Honor, to let him walk all the way into Osmundsbury in the pouring rain, with that arm.

I'd no time to say anything to him about it, but, as I was putting up my night-cap, I thought to myself I should have a word to say to you. Why, my dear, what is the matter?"

Honor was in Mrs Joad's arms, and the tears that would not come all day were flowing freely.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

POSTILIONS along the road from Osmundsbury to London that night had stories to tell of a tall dark gentleman who seemed in a desperate hurry to reach the end of his journey. They were willing enough to do their best for one so liberal with his money, but luck was against him the whole way. One unaccountable disaster after another came to hinder him, until you would have sworn that he was bewitched. A spring broke, a horse cast a shoe, another suddenly went lame, a wheel came off, all these accidents occurring at the longest possible distances from any stage where fresh horses or another chaise could be procured. The post-boys began to shake their heads and wonder darkly "what was wrong with him"; their opinions differed as to whether the mysterious traveller were a murderer or an informer, or had robbed a church and was flying with the proceeds.

It confirmed their suspicions that the traveller was some dangerous criminal when none of these successive mishaps drew a single oath from him. Having inquired what was the matter, and what could be done to remedy it with the utmost speed, he said not another word. After the breaking of a shaft had delayed them for over an hour, he always stood by whenever they

changed horses and examined the harness; he would take neither food nor rest at any of the inns. For mile after mile, as the chaise went on through the night, he sat in a corner, wrapped in his travelling cloak, never moving except to take out his watch or to put his hand in his pocket when they came to a turnpike gate. Glancing furtively at the white face and hollow eyes, post-boys, ostlers, and landlords were convinced that he must have something terrible upon his mind. "Feels the rope round his neck a'ready," said the wife of a blacksmith living about thirty miles from London, who was roused out of sleep by a violent knocking at his door in the middle of the night. The blacksmith, spitting on the coin for luck, rejoined that if he were to get half a guinea for every shoe he put on for them, he wished the rest of his customers might be in danger of hanging.

Fenwick was barely conscious of all these interruptions; they were like the sticks and rubbish that fall into a stream and disturb its surface, while beneath the deep tide is sweeping on.

When his journey began only one thought was clear in his mind: he must find Sir Charles Mendip as speedily as he could, and he must kill him. It would be quite easy; no vulgar assassination, but a duel. Fenwick pictured it as the post-chaise bumped and rattled along the road. It should be with cold steel, not with pistols; Sir Charles fenced indifferently well, but Fenwick knew himself for one of the best fencers in England, perhaps in France. It was lucky for him that it was his left arm which the rioters broke; it might hamper him a little, but it could make no difference in the end.

He gloated over the thought of how he would play



with his adversary. He would not kill him too quickly; he would pretend to be holding his own with difficulty, he would even give ground a little, to flatter Sir Charles with hopes of an easy victory; then he would alter his tactics, and gradually Sir Charles would discover that he was being hard pressed. He would drive him to and fro, up and down. Fenwick's imagination saw the heavy red face turning grey, saw the beads of sweat starting out round the brow, and saw the dry lips part in the gasp which means that a man has come to the end of his powers. Once let a fencer open his mouth to breathe and there is no hope for him; that maxim was knocked into Fenwick as soon as he was big enough to grasp a foil. Sir Charles might strike and thrust as he pleased; those heavy, ox-like men were often wild at the last, but Fenwick knew that he could hold him. When he was tired of the sport it would be just a flicker of steel and one thrust, no more. There was no fear that Sir Charles would be able to counter.

Then, when Honor's husband lay dead at his feet, he would go back to Honor. With the thoughts of her as Sir Charles's wife his face quivered, then grew hard again. He remembered Mr Patten's description of the wedding, and he had seen Sir Charles in his cups. He remembered the night of a ball at Elystan House, when the Prince of Wales came with Fox and Sheridan, all three in a state of intoxication, and the horse-laugh with which Sir Charles himself, not more than half sober, called the attention of the company to Fenwick's disgust. "D—— me, look at the fellow, he's half a Frenchy, and if he has no head for liquor, what the devil right has he to look down his nose at those who can drink like men?"

There was a commotion, quelled on the instant by Lady Elystan moving among her guests like Circe among the swine. Without speaking a word to Sir Charles, she looked at him coldly and steadily until the red face flushed redder, and he mumbled something that might be an apology. What must Honor have felt on finding herself in the power of this sullen brute? It showed her rare courage that she was able, alone and unfriended, to contrive her escape from him.

She should never go back; the red mist came over Fenwick's eyes at the thought, and he was no longer a polished gentleman on his way to an affair of honour, but something more akin to the animal. If he could kill Sir Charles in no other way, he would—— He pulled himself up. It was useless to think such thoughts, and might unsteady him. For the sake of Honor, as well as for the sake of honour—his generation saw nothing unseemly in a pun—he must kill Sir Charles like a gentleman, and he had no real doubt of being able to do it.

What a fool he had been never to guess at the truth! Now that he looked back, he could remember a score of indications that might have enabled him to learn Honor's real story, if he had not chosen obstinately to know nothing but the story he invented for her. There had been hints, clues, a word here, an allusion there, as when she spoke of not being allowed any money, or of the invitation to the masked ball. Any one of these, followed up, would have set him on the right track. A single question from him would have brought out the whole truth; it seemed incredible that he should have failed to see what now was fatally clear. He remembered that once or twice, when

Honor had begun the story of her own accord, he checked her. He had forbidden her to think or to speak of the past, partly from an honest belief that it was bad for her mind and body—partly, he told himself with bitterness, because he was jealous of everything in her life in which he could claim no share.

He was paying dearly for his jealousy. Would the payment end when his enemy was cleared out of the way? Would Honor forgive him, or would she shrink from him? He was cruel to her a few hours ago. He had spoken to her as if he doubted her, never uttered one word of sympathy for all she had endured, gone from her without one prayer for forgiveness. She must think him worse than Sir Charles; he dared not look at her for fear of losing his self-control, dared not take her in his arms again until she was free. When she came after him into the hall, holding out the signet-ring, he was obliged to fling away from her, like a churl or a madman, without saying farewell, or he must have broken down.

“Fool, fool that I have been,” ran in his head. The hoofs of the horses, thudding on the miry road, beat “fool! fool!”—the crazy springs of the post-chaise creaked “fool!” in answer; the postilion whistled “fool!” as he plied whip and spur; the turnpike gates echoed “fool!” as they clanged behind him.

So the night wore on, and mile after mile of the London road went by; and at last, stiff and weary, Fenwick was set down in Jermyn Street, in the grey light of a winter's morning.

In Jermyn Street lived his mother's old servant who married a coachman; they let rooms, and he knew that they would take him in if it were pos-

sible. It would be quieter than a hotel, and he had no mind to see more of his fellow-creatures than could be helped. If he succeeded in killing Sir Charles, he would have to keep out of the way for some little time, and Mrs Wix could be trusted to return discreet answers to Bow Street runners, or any other undesirable inquirers after his whereabouts.

In all his forecasts, he never took into consideration the possibility that he might be killed or wounded in the encounter, and Sir Charles get off scot-free. Without knowing it, he was trusting to the Judgment of Heaven as devoutly as any consecrated champion of a righteous cause in the Middle Ages.

Mrs Wix received him in a confusion of joy and distress—joy at seeing her mistress's son again, and distress at his broken arm and his altered looks. Of course her best rooms were at his service for a day or a night or a week, as long as he might want them; as a matter of fact, they were empty at the moment, but she would have turned out the Prince himself to make room for Master Claud; she bobbed a curtsy and begged pardon, but the old name would come to her tongue. Not but what she would scarcely have known him for Master Claud, looking so ill as he did—and what had he done to himself, to be carrying his arm in a sling? Had she not better send the boy for the Scotch doctor, who lived just round the corner, and made such a good cure of her husband's wrist when he was thrown off the box, the night they had the illuminations for the Peace, four years ago? And while the doctor was attending to him, she would get breakfast ready, for she was sure that Master Claud—another bob and another apologetic murmur—must need it, after travelling all night.



Claud would not see the doctor, and did not desire any breakfast.

Mrs Wix was much perturbed. If he would lie down and take a little rest on his bed she would say nothing, for a good sound sleep was equal to a dinner any day; but if he were going abroad, it was another thing. He had only to look out of the window and see for himself that a fog was coming up; no one in his senses would go out on an empty stomach in a London fog.

Claud submitted to drink a cup of coffee as the quickest way of getting Mrs Wix to give orders for his clothes to be brushed and his boots cleaned. As soon as this was done he went out into the fog unheeding her remonstrances.

His plan of action, arranged on the journey, was clear before him. The encounter with Sir Charles must be no disorderly brawl, but a duel with all the correct accompaniments and ceremonies.

Sir Charles was sure to have friends willing to act for him; Fenwick had determined that his own second should be a Colonel Duggan—a quiet elderly man about Town, who, since retiring from the service, divided his time between playing piquet and arranging affairs of honour.

In the days before Claud went to live in Sussex he had been on as intimate terms with the Colonel as any man was admitted to be, and, from what he saw of his conduct of other affairs, he could be certain that his second would not annoy him with officiousness or curiosity. Honor's name would be kept out of it, and everything would be managed in a quiet and businesslike fashion.

There would be no difficulty in finding the Colonel,

who was a man of methodical habits. On every day of the week except Sundays and Wednesdays, if in Town, he was to be found in the window of his Club, overlooking the Green Park, until three o'clock in the afternoon. This was a Wednesday morning; therefore, soon after midday, he would probably walk over to St James's Square to wait upon his cousin, Lord Elystan, with whom he spent several hours every week. No one except themselves knew what they did in that time; Lady Elystan used to declare that her lord made the Colonel taste all the medicines which his doctor or his hypochondriac fancy had prescribed for him in the past week.

Fenwick looked at his watch; it wanted nearly two hours to noon. He would intercept the Colonel as he came up to the house. He did not want to kick his heels walking up and down St James's Square from twenty minutes past ten till some time after twelve o'clock. How should he pass the time?

He almost laughed when the thought leapt into his mind that he would call upon Mr Rivers; he would see for himself the hypocritical old scoundrel who had betrayed his trust and sold his ward. What he should do when he saw him, Fenwick had no fixed idea; one could not call out an attorney, and he had no horsewhip with him. Perhaps he might find one ready to his hand in the hall.

It was a day upon which most reasonable beings would welcome an excuse for staying at home with closed doors and windows to shut out as much as possible of the fog. As Fenwick walked northwards, the yellowish-brown curtain wrapped itself more and more thickly round his path, stinging his eyes and making breathing difficult. In spite of the heat of

his indignation, his steps began to flag before he found himself in Brunswick Square.

He did not know the number, but an errand-boy with a basket on his arm was able to tell him that it was the house with the blue door. He strode up the steps and rapped sharply. Scarcely had he let the knocker fall than the door was opened, and out came a young lady in walking dress, followed by a footman. As he drew aside to let her pass, he saw a look of compassion come into the large brown eyes when they glanced at his sling. She hesitated, paused, and turned back to ask—

“Did you wish to see any one in this house, sir?”

“I came to see Mr Rivers, madam.”

“If it is my brother that you mean, you would find him in his office in Lincoln’s Inn Fields.”

“I think, madam, it must be your father with whom I have business.” This lovely creature must be the kind “Jane” of whom Honor sometimes spoke.

“I am sorry that it would be quite impossible for you to see my father, sir. You probably have not heard that he was seized with a paralytic stroke about a year ago. His health since then has not allowed him to attend to business, and he sees no one but members of his own family.”

Claud stood mute, his head bowed. Vengeance was taken out of his hands in this case. What use to denounce a helpless invalid, who probably was incapable of understanding what was said to him?

“Will you not leave your name, sir?” pleaded the gentle voice. “Sometimes he is brighter than usual, and seems to like being told that his friends have made inquiries for him.”

"He would not know my name."

Jane hesitated again before speaking. "I am sure my brother would be glad——"

"It has nothing to do with him," said Claud brusquely. "The business is at an end. I thank you, madam."

He went down the steps, and the fog swallowed him up before he reached the corner of the square.

One of those against whom he had promised himself to pay off the score was beyond his reach. Honor's guardian was as good as dead. What if Honor's husband were actually dead? It would be a solution of the difficulty, but to Fenwick at that moment it appeared as if it would be a crowning touch of mockery.

Dragging himself on through the heavy fog that obscured sights and deadened sounds, it seemed to him that he was a ghost moving through a world of ghosts, no longer a living man. The fierce rage in his heart had died down into a steady determination to fulfil his purpose, with no excitement or exaltation to gild it. He no longer felt that it would be a supreme joy to kill the man who had married Honor; he only knew that he must do it, and that nothing else concerned him until it was done.

As he came into St James's Square, he found himself in a clearer atmosphere. The fog was rolling away to the north-east, and a copper-coloured sun was making feeble attempts to shine upon the sooty sparrows who were quarrelling over a handful of crumbs at the foot of the statue of King William III. in the garden.



Fenwick began pacing slowly round the square, keeping an eye on the house on the north side; noon struck from St James's Church.

He became aware that he was very tired—unreasonably and unaccountably tired, he said to himself, having forgotten his long fast and his all-night journey. If the Colonel did not come soon, he was doubtful whether he could wait much longer. Perhaps it would be better to go back to Jermyn Street and send him a letter. A few hours' rest might not be loss of time, after all; he did not want his hand to be unsteady.

The hall-porter at Elystan House would be sure to know whether Colonel Duggan was in town; he might ask him that much, and if it were repeated to Lord or Lady Elystan it could do no harm.

He rang the bell and knocked for several moments before the door was opened, not by the affable old porter who knew him well, but by a pasty-faced young footman, who gaped at him with a mouth that seemed incapable of shutting.

"Can you tell me whether Colonel Duggan is coming here to-day?" asked Fenwick.

"Dunno, I'm sure, sir."

"Is he in town?"

"Dunno, sir."

"Is Lord Elystan in town?"

The youth's goggle eyes had wandered to a carriage with two ladies in it that was stopping next door. The question was repeated before he answered: "His lordship is in Norfolk, sir, staying with Mr Coke."

Fenwick could not believe his ears, having heard Lord Elystan declare many a time that if there were one part of England more likely to be fatal to him than another, it was the Eastern counties.

"And Lady Elystan? where is she?"

"Her ladyship went down to Bath after her confinement."

Her confinement! Fenwick's head was reeling. He leaned against a pillar to steady himself. "Do you mean that she has a baby?"

"A boy, sir, and a great satisfaction to his lordship and the family, on account of the rest being girls."

He must be insane or dreaming.

"I never knew she had any children," he muttered confusedly, fumbling in his pockets. "I have been out of London for over two years."

The chinking sound appeared to quicken the youth's intelligence. "Did you mean to inquire for the Dowager, sir? for Emilia, Lady Elystan?"

"Is old Lord Elystan dead?"

"The late Lord Elystan died a twelvemonth ago last October, sir."

"And where is his widow living?"

"Her ladyship is not his widow any more, sir. She contracted a second alliance with Sir Charles Mendip last May."

Fenwick staggered and dropped down upon the steps.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

THE fog that swirled round the head of Claud Fenwick on his way to Brunswick Square was thick in Harley Street, where Lady Maria Vane occupied a suite of rooms in one of the gloomiest of the drearily respectable houses on the east side.

She was too old, she said, and too poor to be troubled with all the cares of a householder. She ate little herself—which was true so long as it was at her own expense—and she did not see why she should pay half a dozen idle servants to eat their heads off at her charges. She could not struggle with rates and taxes and tradesmen's weekly accounts. In her rooms she knew exactly what she was paying; she had a maid and a companion to wait upon her, and there was no sense in her keeping a man-servant, since the man belonging to the house could do what she wanted.

So Lady Maria lived in the drawing-room suite and drew her dividends and her jointure every quarter, and yearly acquired greater skill in the art of making other people provide her with what she wanted. To the audacity of a Turkish corsair she added the shamelessness of an Irish beggar or a collector for deserving charities. Society laughed, frowned, said "Pshaw!"

or "Hang the old woman!" but Society knew better than to resist her exactions; whether she wanted tickets for a concert from the Duchess or a place for a *protégé* from a Minister, Lady Maria obtained her object sooner or later, and those who denied her were sure to regret it.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning, and Lady Maria's maid, having finished dressing her mistress, had gone out to take her ladyship's best wig to the hair-dresser for a few touches; there was to be a *soirée* at a house in St James's Square that night, and though Lady Maria had not received an invitation, she intended to be present. Her companion, a pale depressed female, with red-rimmed eyes and wisps of straw-coloured hair starting out at all points of a large head, having arrived an hour ago, was bidden to spend the time in the drawing-room, dusting, till Lady Maria should make her appearance.

In the drawing-room the fog seemed thicker and darker than in the street outside; it clung to the heavy blue rep curtains, to the Brussels carpet, to the piles of miscellaneous objects, some fruits of Lady Maria's long course of thieving and extorting. What she could not obtain on demand, she not infrequently carried off under the name of a loan. The results were to be seen in the litter huddled on tables and chairs, behind the glass doors of the cupboard intended to hold books, and on the shelves beside the fireplace. Here was an ivory fan, painted with rose-wreaths and gilt ribbons; beside it was a worked apron, wrapped up in an old number of the 'Anti-Jacobin,' which Lady Maria had borrowed to read and forgotten to return. She did not forget to return the opera-glasses lying beside it, but told the rightful owner that he could not object to her keeping



them, since she had never found any others to suit her old eyes so well, and she would promise never to look through them at him when he went past her window to call on his mistress. An open biscuit-box disclosed a faded green veil, and odds and ends of ribbon; the spikes of a broken silk parasol were tangled in the fringe of a torn Indian shawl. The room might have been a pawnbroker's den, except that it was too untidy for any trade to be carried on with success. Poor Miss Case, blinking and peering among the gloom, succeeded in making worse confusion by upsetting a box of papers from a chair in the corner, just as Lady Maria, in bonnet and cloak, opened the door.

"Lord, Miss Case, what are you doing? Throwing my memoirs about on the carpet?"

Lady Maria's memoirs were her latest device for obtaining stationery and annoying her acquaintance. As she knew all the scandals of three or four generations, and was not likely to spoil any of them in the telling from considerations of decency or of other persons' feelings, every one with relatives known in the society of the last seventy years was on thorns as to what those memoirs might contain.

Miss Case flushed pink to the tip of her long nose, and began picking up the sheets of paper.

"There's nothing written on these, my lady."

"Of course there is not," retorted Lady Maria. "Do you think I would leave my memoirs about so that you or Cottle might sell odd sheets to the newspapers?"

"I do assure your ladyship——"

"Put them back into the box, and be quick about it, child, and then put on that bonnet that makes you look like an ill-cooked mince-pie, and come with me."

"Your ladyship is never going out in this weather."

"Why not, I should like to know? Lady Dunster promised me her carriage this morning, and there it is, at the door. Hurry, child! was your grandfather a snail, or your grandmother a dormouse?"

Two subdued tears dropped from Miss Case's faded eyes upon the strings of the bonnet which Lady Maria derided, and she wiped them away furtively with her glove as she followed her patroness downstairs.

Lady Maria had a long list of errands for that morning, and Lady Dunster's coachman and footman, knowing by experience that they would get no vails for their pains, were heartily sick of their job long before, by her direction, they turned into St James's Square and stopped one door off from Elystan House.

"Robinson is such a fool, it is no use telling him what to say," announced Lady Maria in tones fully audible to the unwilling Robinson, standing at the carriage door, "so you can just get out, child,—take care not to show your ankles, for they're monstrous thick,—and say 'Lady Maria Vane's compliments, and the Marchioness's footman must have left her ticket for the *soirée* to-night at the wrong house, so she has come herself to fetch another to prevent mistakes in delivery.' Make haste—there's the man waiting at the door."

Poor Miss Case looked despairingly from the Marchioness's hall-porter in the doorway to Lady Maria in the carriage. Formidable as both were, there was no doubt as to which she feared the more, and she tumbled out of the carriage with an awkwardness which would have drawn fresh criticism from her patroness if Lady Maria's attention had not been caught by something else.

"Who is that at the door of Elystan House?" Lady

Maria fumbled among the fringes of her cloak for her glass. "I'll be hanged if it isn't Claud Fenwick. What is he doing up here? I thought he had turned hermit, or Methodist, or left the country. What has he done to his arm? Out of the way, you fool,"—to Robinson. "He can't be drunk at this hour! Let me see to him!"

Miss Case, having delivered Lady Maria's message, turned and fled without waiting for a reply. In her scurry across the pavement she nearly ran into Lady Maria, who was at work loosing the cravat of the unconscious Fenwick.

"Good Lord, child, can't you look where you're going," demanded her Ladyship. "I never saw anything run about like you, unless it was a guinea-pig. Give me your muff to put under his head."

"Dear Lady Maria, had you not better come back to the carriage?"

"Why? What are you afraid of, dolt! He's not drunk, and he'll not bite you. If he did, he would spit it out again fast enough."

The pasty-faced footman here exploded in a guffaw. Lady Maria turned upon him as quickly as a snake whose tail has been trodden upon.

"What are you about, fellow? If this gentleman is sober, that is more than can be said for you. What have you been doing to make him drop down in front of you?"

Foolish as he was, the young footman had sense enough to recognise Lady Maria.

"I was doing nothing at all to him, my lady," he protested, almost blubbering at the suggestion. "The gentleman came and asked me for Colonel Duggan and then for Lady Elystan, and seemed all taken aback to

hear she was in Bath, and it turned out that it was the Dowager that he wanted, and when I told him she was married, he goes down like—like an ox, my lady, asking your pardon.”

“And you stand there like an ass,” said Lady Maria crisply. “So he wanted Duggan,” she muttered between her teeth, looking down at the closed eyes. “That must be stopped. If he were to kill Mendip everything may be ruined.”

“My muff will be ruined,” whimpered Miss Case.

“Hold your tongue,” commanded her patroness. “You can make yourself another quite as good out of the cat when she dies. I wonder whether Fenwick is going to be very ill; if there is any risk of it, he had better be carried at once into the house. Lord Elystan is a rich man, and can afford to pay for a surgeon if one has to be sent for. If I were to take him into the carriage, they might expect me to pay.”

As she stood regarding him uncertainly, Fenwick opened his eyes and struggled to rise from the pavement.

“So you’re better—that’s right,” pronounced Lady Maria, with an encouraging nod. “Do you two great men mean to stand there staring like gabies and do nothing to help Mr Fenwick on to his feet? Put him into the carriage—I’ll take the chance,” she concluded recklessly, her love of excitement overcoming her anxiety lest she might be made responsible for any expense.

Fenwick made an effort to collect himself. “I do not like to trouble your ladyship. If your footman would call a hackney-coach to take me back to my rooms——”

“Where are your rooms? in Jermyn Street? Pooh,



man, that's no distance! I'll take you there. Get in, and put your feet up on the seat opposite; it don't matter crowding Miss Case, she's as thin as a thread-paper, and can sit on a pin's head."

Fenwick had sufficient strength to resist the latter part of her directions, but no more. He submitted to be helped into the carriage, and leaned back against the cushions, too weary to speak or even to think, while Lady Maria's keen old eyes watched him from under their shaggy brows. He had always been a favourite with her, recalling, as he did in some mysterious way, an actor in her past about whom Lady Maria's memoirs would be silent.

When the carriage stopped at Fenwick's door in Jermyn Street, she insisted upon coming in with him, to the indignation of Mrs Wix, who was on the watch for his return, and fussed out into the hall to know what he would take for dinner.

"Dinner? My good woman, Mr Fenwick will not be taking any dinner after his faint. The surgeon must come round and let him blood, by and by, after I have gone. I must have a few words with him before I go, so you need not wait. Miss Case can sit in the carriage till I come down."

It was not easy to get up the single flight of stairs, and by the time that he reached his sitting-room Fenwick was obliged to sink into the nearest chair, quite incapable of paying any attention to the lady. Everything was reeling about him, his limbs were numb, there was a sound of rushing water in his ears. Gradually the dizziness lessened, he was conscious of a stinging sensation in the nostrils, and when the blackness cleared away from before his eyes he found Lady Maria beside him, holding a smelling-bottle to his

nose, and stroking his forehead. "Poor fellow! poor fellow!" she was saying under her breath, in a tone that no one had heard from her for over fifty years.

Once upon a time, it struck him, Lady Maria must have been very attractive, if not regularly beautiful like Lady Elystan. Her hand was still perfect in shape, though the skin was yellow. It was withdrawn from his head as soon as he noticed it, and the voice changed to Lady Maria's well-known incisive accents.

"So you're coming to yourself, young man. It was lucky for you I happened to be passing; that footman would have let you die on the pavement sooner than loosen your collar."

"He told me something," said Claud, trying to recall his memory. "What was it?"

"Take another whiff of the salts. Case is not such a fool as I thought; she came running and squawking upstairs after me with the bottle; I could not think what she was about. Take care! don't drop them! the chemist has the impudence to charge me half-a-crown every time he refills my salts bottle, though he ought to do it reasonably, as my maid is his wife's first cousin. I always recommend my friends to go to him."

"Is it true?" asked Claud, letting the smelling-salts drop into her hand. Lady Maria deliberately seated herself on a chair opposite to him.

"Of course it is, if by 'it' you mean Lady Elystan's second marriage. She married my hopeful grandson in May—more fool she, for she loses nearly all her fortune, and he is not worth it. If you wanted her yourself, why did you stay buried down in Sussex after the old lord died?"

"I never heard of his death."

"Lord love you, man, that comes of living in the country! Jekyll is quite right when he says that every day you spend in the country is a day given to the grave before your decease."

"How did it happen?"

"If you want the story you shall have it, before I go home to dinner. Did you hear that I and Rivers, the attorney, married my grandson, Sir Charles Mendip, to Rivers's ward, Honor Basset? It was a scoundrelly job, and I never pretended it could be anything else. Rivers maundered about his dear ward; but then he is a churchwarden. Mendip was up to his neck in debts, and the girl's fortune gave him a chance of starting afresh. She was only fifteen, and had lived with two old women in Somersetshire ever since she was born—too innocent to make trouble. What's the matter with you, man? You're paler than ever. If you are going to drop on the floor, I'll call to the women downstairs to fetch a surgeon, and go home."

"I entreat your ladyship to go on."

"On the way down to Sussex to spend the honeymoon, Mendip meets Lady Elystan—they both swear it was accidental, and they may be speaking the truth, though she has had little practice in it. He prefers to go home with her and spend the evening yawning over cards with the old lord, rather than yawning with his bride. The servants are told to drive Lady Mendip on to Flamington Park; they get drunk and upset the carriage into the river. Next day the yokels fish out Lady Mendip's cloak. No need to sigh, man; if nine brides out of ten were drowned on their wedding-day it would be the best thing that could happen for them—or for their husbands."

Lady Maria shut the gold top of her smelling-bottle with a sharp click.

"You can imagine the to-do. Some people went so far as to say it was all arranged beforehand, and the servants bribed to upset the carriage. Old Lord Elystan was so vexed with all the cackle and fuss, he insisted on going back to London, in vile weather, and caught a chill. It flew to his stomach, which must have been quite rotten with all the drugs he put into it. So he died."

So this was why Lady Elystan came to beg him to go up to London with them. If he had gone, Honor would have found no shelter at his house that dismal night, and Sir Charles would indeed have been rid of his bride.

"There was no other scoundrel in particular to clack about just then, and every one enjoyed it. It was quite decided that Mendip was a murderer—as if he would have had the wit to work out such a plan! He was given the cut wherever he went. So he drank hard to pass away the time and took it into his silly noddle that he was really the poor girl's murderer, through having left her to his servants when he knew they were in liquor. Then he drank harder still to drown thought, and made matters worse—took to groaning about the next world. I told him that nothing would persuade me there was any such place, but if there was, at least he might be sure of meeting most of his relations and friends where he thought he was going. Well, that did no good, so I asked the Bishop to send him some cheerful books on religion to make his mind easier. But they would not work," said Lady Maria, in the same tone of just annoyance in which she would have spoken of the failure of a



hair-dye to do all that its advertisements claimed. "Religion is never of any use when you really need it, except that it is an advantage to be able to tell the servants they will go to hell if they rob you, when you have not enough evidence to call in a constable."

"And Lady Elystan married him?"

"I thought there was nothing left for Mendip but a padded cell and a strait waistcoat, and private asylums are so monstrously dear, I don't know who could have paid for keeping him there. All his wife's money went to Mrs Rivers, and old Rivers was so overcome with sensibility when he was told Lady Mendip was at the bottom of the river that he was taken with the palsy, and he has never spoken a word of sense since then. Egerton gets something for marrying Jane Rivers."

"Then how——"

"Lady Elystan went round to Mendip's rooms one day, and insisted on his marrying her. It was his best chance, and he had the wit to take it. She has brought him down to a reasonable allowance of liquor already. They are living very quietly in a little house in Brompton, and paying off his debts by instalments."

Claud bent his head down on his hands.

"She knows how to get her own way. But if you wanted her, why didn't you speak sooner? You might have had her if you chose; it was easy to see that if she cared for any one besides herself, it was you. But you're better without her."

"If she does not love him why did she marry him?" asked Claud dully. The dizziness was beginning to sweep over him again, but he would hold it back until he knew all there was to know.

"Because she saw him drinking himself into his

grave or into an asylum, and she felt she owed him something for carrying him off on his wedding-night, and causing all the trouble. She knew she could save him if any one could. I detest the woman," said Lady Maria, getting up from her chair, "but she has wits and courage, and if he lives to be sixty, thanks to her, he'll end as a respectable man and an ornament to the Peerage. That reminds me—I can't have you challenging him to a duel. You need not deny that was what you were after when you went to Elystan House and asked for Colonel Duggan."

Claud looked down on the ground without answering.

"It can't be, and I tell you why. Lord Dunster is paralysed all down one side, and can't live till next summer. If you kill Mendip you'll spoil his chance of being a Viscount, and you may kill the child that Lady Elystan has been going with for six months!"

Claud sat silent.

"At least you must wait till March. The peerage goes in the female line, and be the brat boy or girl, it is bound to succeed if it lives."

"I shall not fight with Sir Charles." His wits were slipping from him, but Claud could still realise that the one man in the world who must be safe from him was Lady Elystan's husband.

What was he to do? He did not know, he was too tired to care. His strongest emotion was a longing for Lady Maria to go away; her voice hurt him. He shut his eyes and turned away his head, as if trying to escape from her.

There was a bustle in the hall downstairs, and a sound of voices and footsteps.

"We thought he might be here—I know he used to

stay here when he was in London." It was an elderly voice, with its usual placid smoothness somewhat fretted by fatigue and anxiety.

"He is in the rooms on the first floor, ma'am, but I don't know whether he can receive visitors. He was taken ill, I understand, and a lady brought him here in her carriage."

There was an exclamation from the other voice, the sound of light young feet upon the staircase, the door was opened, and there stood Honor.

Claud's first thought was that the fairy bride had not forsaken him. An instant later he remembered Lady Maria, and struggled to get out of the chair and throw himself between the two; Mendip's grandmother must not know that Mendip's bride still lived.

Honor, checked from rushing to him by the sight of Lady Maria, paused on the threshold, and for an instant the old woman and the girl looked into each other's eyes, as on Honor's wedding-day at Brunswick Square.

Then the haggard face changed, softened, lit up with a glow that momentarily brought back its youth. "Honor Basset!" she cried in a voice which was that of a girl, "if the dead come back to life, tell me when my dead is coming to me."

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

THERE was silence in the room while one might have counted twenty, both Lady Maria and Fenwick gazing at Honor until the girl spoke.

"I never was dead. I got out of the coach while Sir Charles was asleep, and I hid from him. I did not know the coach had gone into the river until yesterday."

"Come nearer and let me look at you," said Lady Maria hoarsely.

She pulled Honor beneath the window, and looked her over from head to foot without speaking; then she thrust her away, and burst into a short bitter laugh.

"Yes, you're flesh and blood, though there's not much flesh about you. Lord, what fools we are, and I am a very old woman."

She looked it as she stood there under the light, her eyes dim, her hand at her trembling mouth. To those who had seen her, young and radiant, a moment before, the change was alarming.

Honor pulled forward a chair, but Lady Maria waved her away with an impatient gesture.

"Leave me alone, child." Her hand, groping, found



the back of the chair, and she leaned upon it, swaying gently to and fro.

Claud and Honor waited, expecting to see her fall, but to their astonishment the swaying movement gradually ceased, and Lady Maria took her hand off the chair and looked round her defiantly.

"What brought you here?" she asked of Honor.

"I came to find Claud," Honor answered, turning to him with a half-smile. "Cousin Louisa was afraid that you might be going to fight a duel. I persuaded her to bring me to London. She remembered the address of the rooms where you used to go."

"Tell me, what are you to him, child?" demanded Lady Maria. "Are you his mistress or his wife?"

Claud, having at length succeeded in pulling himself out of the chair, turned furiously upon Lady Maria; but Honor smiled at him and answered with perfect calmness—

"I am his wife."

"How can you be his wife when you were married to my grandson?" Lady Maria's eyes were gleaming fiercely.

"It was my fault!" Claud thrust himself between them. "I told her that the first marriage made no difference to us."

"It was not his fault," said Honor quietly, still looking at the old woman. "I was ill and not in my right mind when he found me and took me to the French nuns to be nursed. I thought I had told him about Sir Charles, but I was mistaken. I never wished to think of it or speak of it again, and I let him marry me without trying to tell him more."

"It was not so," Claud began, but Lady Maria cut him short.

"When did you go through the ceremony?"

"A fortnight ago yesterday," answered Honor promptly.

"A fortnight ago! Good Lord! why, 'tis Mendip has committed bigamy, not you."

The old woman leaned once more against the chair, her head bent, her lips working. Fenwick, suddenly realising all that was involved, gave a short exclamation.

"Aye," said Lady Maria, looking round at him, 'you've had your revenge on my grandson, better than if you'd spit him through the body. The marriage is void, and the child that is coming, instead of being heir to Lord Dunster, will be a nameless bastard."

There was another silence, until Lady Maria pulled at her cloak, and began to move across the room with shuffling steps.

"I must go home. Where's Case? I've kept the carriage waiting too long, and those sharks will expect me to give them something to drink my health, and I'm a poor old woman."

"Will you take my arm downstairs?" asked Honor. 'Claud, as you see, is not fit to wait upon you."

Lady Maria clutched the arm without another word, and leaned upon it heavily. Half-way downstairs, she stopped and again looked intently at Honor.

"Yes, you're Honor Basset; but you're a woman, not a child, though by the same token, you're only sixteen."

"Seventeen in February," said Honor, with a touch of dignity.

Lady Maria went on down the stairs. "I was seventeen when I met——" She stopped again in

the hall. "Do you love Fenwick?" she asked, turning a piercing look on the girl.

Honor neither blushed nor faltered. "I do."

"Then stick to him, child, no matter whether they call you his wife or his mistress. There's the carriage, and I suppose the men are in the public-house. Look at Case, half asleep, with her bonnet to one side—did you ever see such a quiz? She was a love-child. If she is like her mother, her father must have been sorry for his mistake."

A ragged boy, standing at the horse's head, was sent to extricate coachman and footman from the public-house, and Lady Maria was packed into the carriage, which was on the point of driving off when the old lady's hand was thrust through the window, beckoning to Honor on the steps.

"I must have time to think, child. I'm old. I can't be hurried. Promise me that you and Fenwick will not leave town without seeing me again."

"I promise," Honor called back as the carriage started with a jerk that completed the displacement of Case's bonnet. Going back to the sitting-room, Honor found Claud in the charge of Mrs Joad, who with great self-denial had been keeping out of the way until now.

"I knew you would have a world of things to say to each other, so I stayed below till I saw Honor going to the door with that old lady, and then I knew an invalid ought never to be left alone, so I came up to him. But if you'll forgive an old woman, that's nursed two husbands, for interfering, Honor, my dear, I think he would be better in bed."

Honor agreed, and Claud made no resistance. All

that he wished was to lie still and to have Honor sitting at his side, or where he could see her.

Thanks to a North Country constitution, after two days' rest he was able to get up, very little the worse for his experiences. In those two days he and Honor had much talk of what was to be done. Mrs Joad was called into consultation, and gave advice with her usual mixture of shrewdness and simplicity, without thought of self.

The result was that Fenwick recalled himself to the memory of a personage who in former days had expressed a readiness to befriend him, and much to his own surprise found that the great man had not forgotten his existence, and would be as good as his word.

"If that is the sort of thing you want, I can do something for you, Mr Fenwick; you can go in place of young Tufton. He was to have been sent out as the best chance of breaking off an undesirable connection, at his mother's desire; but his father made such a deuce of a commotion that I heard, two hours ago, young Hopeful was going to stay at home. But if you could wait, we might do something better for you. The country owes you something for not making any agitation when your observatory was wrecked a little while ago."

"The observatory belonged to my landlord, sir, and no agitation would restore the papers and instruments that were destroyed."

"I can tell you in confidence that for certain reasons it would have been very inconvenient to have too much attention drawn to the business just then, but it was never intended that you should suffer."

Fenwick bowed. "If I may take Mr Tufton's place, sir, I shall be satisfied."



Having been bowed out of the great man's presence, and received his instructions from one of the great man's clerks, Fenwick was walking back across St James's Park, so much absorbed in thinking of what he had to tell Honor that he never noticed a little group standing close to the water until he was hailed by name.

"Upon my word, here comes Fenwick. We expected to see you with a long beard and a grey robe, after living all this age as a hermit."

The speaker was Mr Gardiner; with him were two young bucks whom Fenwick used to meet at Elystan House and two ladies. At a glance he knew one of them for Charlotte, still looking like a Watteau shepherdess, disguised in furs; the other was standing turned away from him, her plumed hat and long thick cloak hiding every outline of head and figure. It was not until she turned slowly back that he recognised Lady Elystan.

She was changed, and the most remarkable feature of the change was that he could not say in what it lay. Something, perhaps, was due to her dress, though with masculine ignorance he could not have defined in what respect the simple walking dress she wore that morning differed from the equally simple walking dresses which she used to wear. Only a woman could have told him that there is all the distance of the poles between the simplicity of deliberate choice and selection and the simplicity of narrow means.

"You here, cousin? I did not know you were in Town." She gave him her hand, with an indifference which only a very acute observer would have detected to be a shade overdone. "Have you come here to see how the ducks are bearing this cold weather?"

"How do you do, Mr Fenwick? I expect you have forgotten who I am." Charlotte giggled coquettishly, and tried to blush. "I'm Mrs Daniels now, and, you know—quite an old married woman."

"If I could forget, Mr Gardiner would be able to tell me all particulars," said Fenwick, rousing himself to make a suitable response.

"Naughty man!" cried Charlotte, shaking her curls under her beaver bonnet.

He stood for a few moments chatting idly with them, and observing his cousin. It was as if some influence had coarsened everything about her, from the outlines of her face to the tones of her voice. She was still what the men of her generation called "a monstrous fine woman," and would continue to be one, even when advancing years made her stout and heavy, but the charm that marked her as the one woman in a crowd—something above and apart from all others—was gone.

Only a saint could have lived for eight months as Charles Mendip's wife without losing anything of her finer self. Lady Elystan was no saint, but she was doing for him what few saints could have effected, and was paying the price. To get her own way with a man of his calibre meant that to some extent his way must be hers, and feelings, perceptions, tastes, and instincts were daily blunted in the process.

In many respects Lady Elystan was a better woman than when she carried off Charles Mendip on his wedding evening, from sheer wilfulness and desire to annoy Lady Maria; but she had lost her attraction for Claud Fenwick.

He was not long in escaping from the party; Mr Gardiner and his friends did not find the diversion

they expected in quizzing him; Charlotte vowed, with a pout, that her feet were turning into ice, and that if they stayed there any longer she should be frozen hard to the ground. Lady Elystan stood a little apart from the rest, and gave her hand without speaking.

"I am leaving London next week," he said, under cover of the noise made by Charlotte's little white woolly dog, who was yapping furiously at a passing greyhound. "We may not meet again for a long time. Good luck to you always."

The hard laugh which answered him had lost all its mellow golden notes. "I must be intended for good luck, I have known so much of it in my life. Are you going back to your Folly?"

"No, I go back to my wisdom," said Claud gently. "I was married a little while ago."

"You have my congratulations. Is the lady the parson's daughter or the milkmaid?"

"Neither the one or the other; I have not fulfilled your prophecy. Good-bye, *ma cousine*."

He could say no more. Charlotte was at his elbow, hugging the dog in her arms, and inviting Mr Gardiner and the other men to feel how the poor darling was panting, after nearly being eaten up by that nasty monster. In his heart, as he turned away, he added, "And God help you."

As he looked round for the last time at his cousin she was still standing motionless, gazing down into the ice-covered pool.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

AN eminent King's Counsel, well known in the London Society of his time, has left it on record in his diary for a day in December 1805, that "Lady Maria Vane came to see me, and tried to get an opinion without paying for it, finding nothing else that she could carry away with her."

Both professionally and as man of the world he was accustomed to hear many strange stories, some of which he was able to repeat for the amusement of his friends. The story confided by Lady Maria was among those which no one ever heard from him.

It was a cold winter's morning when she came, and he was sitting in his library in dressing-gown and slippers, with feet on the fender and a novel in his hand, having given instructions that he was not at home to any one. But it was useless, as every one knew, to say "Not at home" to Lady Maria, and he submitted to his fate. There was always some amusement to be got out of her visit, as a set-off against the inconvenience and expense, and he had an unwilling respect for her audacity. Lady Maria, on the other hand, appreciated his good qualities, and would have trusted no other man in the world with her story.



At first sight of her an unreasonable feeling of regret came over him. Lady Maria's eyes were sunken, her hands shaking, her figure was bent; she had grown ten years older in the last month. A break-up was inevitable, sooner or later, after coming to her age, and she would leave none to mourn her; yet he felt that this undesirable old woman would leave a gap which none of the really estimable ladies of his acquaintance was capable of filling.

He hurried to pull another arm-chair to the fire, and rang for wine and biscuits.

"It is a cold day for a drive, and your Ladyship must not refuse such refreshment as a bachelor can offer."

"I'll take a glass of the '94 sherry," said Lady Maria, unfastening her tippet; "but I must keep my head clear, for I've come for advice upon a difficult case, and I've a long story to tell you."

"You should have warned me beforehand that I was to be honoured with your confidence; my dress is not suitable for a consultation." (He never gave the '94 sherry to ladies; he said it was too dry for them.)

"Pooh, man! if a wig and a block were what I wanted, I have both at home. You can listen more comfortably as you are. I came to you because you hear more odd stories that you don't repeat than any man in London. Listen to me."

Whatever Lady Maria's bodily weakness might be, her mind was clear and strong as ever: the story of her grandson's two marriages was told without confusion or waste of words.

When she came to the end, she looked inquiringly at the counsel, whose face as usual betrayed none of his thoughts.

"Well?" she demanded sharply.

"Well," he repeated, getting up from his chair, "it is a very ingenious story; but if you intend it for the plot of a novel, I should advise you to choose something less improbable."

"As if I should write a novel!" snorted Lady Maria, greatly incensed. "Do you take me for a governess or a lady's-maid?"

"It is a curious position, certainly," he went on, standing with his back to the fire. ("Won't you try another biscuit?") Let me see whether I have it right. You gave me no names; so let us call the two husbands A. and B., and your heroine X. A. supposes X. to have been drowned on their wedding-day; she has run away, however, and lived in retirement. A few weeks ago she marries B., who knows nothing of her story. When he discovers the truth he rushes up to London in search of A., and finds that he married another lady seven months ago."

Lady Maria nodded assent. "What are they to do?"

"I fear I must leave the solution to your ingenuity. My dull masculine brain can think of none but a meeting on Hampstead Heath; and that must be carefully arranged, as though all might go well if B. were to kill A., which would enable him to marry X. without any legal impediment, yet if A. were to kill B., A. would be left in a sad position—the husband of two wives."

"But whose husband is he? Was the first marriage legal?"

"Ah, Lady Maria, there you put me in a difficulty; it is impossible for a man to solve such problems in his dressing-gown and slippers. I can only tell you

what would occur to the ordinary man. It is true that if X. was forced into the match as a child, and left her husband on the wedding-day, she might apply to have her marriage declared null and void. Or she might take the line that he had committed bigamy, and apply to be released from him on that ground. On the other hand, people might ask what she was doing after she ran away, and how any man could be such a fool as to marry her without knowing anything of her story."

"What the devil do I care about what people say at my age!" demanded Lady Maria, dropping half an arrowroot biscuit on the Turkey carpet. "What I want to know is, how do they stand in law? (If you put the biscuit back on the plate your servants will eat it, never fear.) Whose husband is the man?"

The counsel shook his head sadly. "Impossible to say. The law has strange quirks, and all the marriages might be found void—or valid."

"All the marriages cannot possibly be valid," cried Lady Maria irritably. "It's a serious matter, I tell you, and the story is true from beginning to end."

"In that case, I should certainly recommend Mr A. and Mr B. to take legal advice upon their positions," said the counsel drily. "You must excuse me, Lady Maria; I have to be in Court in half an hour. Pray sit by the fire till you are rested. I'll call my housekeeper to wait upon you."

Lady Maria had not lived for over eighty years without knowing when she was worsted. She rose slowly from the arm-chair, and pulled her ermine boa round her neck.

"No, I'll not trouble you any further to-day, thank you. 'Tis a pity you have no more of the '94," she sighed, as he opened the door. "That is poor stuff," with a nod to the decanter on the table; "but no doubt it tastes the same to you. Some people lose their palate sadly when they advance in years. Well, you and I have a great deal to be thankful for, if we are able to drink sherry at all at our age."

She knew that his one weakness was to think of himself as a young man. Before he could think of a retort she was in the carriage calling out "Home!" to the footman.

"At least she got nothing out of me," reflected the counsel, going back into the house. "Our age, indeed! Why, the old harridan can remember looking out of a window to see King George the Second go to his coronation! She must be a good quarter of a century older than I am." A comforting thought reawakened the twinkle in his eye as he settled once more over the fire. "I wonder what she would have said if she had known that B. came to me last week."

Lady Maria drove away, gloomy and thoughtful. She said not a word, even to abuse Miss Case, till they reached Harley Street. At dinner she revived sufficiently to reduce the companion to tears, twice over, but afterwards relapsed into a brooding silence.

When she lay down on the sofa for her usual half-hour's rest, she sent Miss Case into the next room. She was falling into the habit of talking to herself, like many old persons, when anxious or upset, and retained enough self-control to yield to it only when alone.

Miss Case, trying to clean a pair of Lady Maria's



white gloves, heard mutterings through the wall, and broken exclamations. Then followed a stillness which made her hope that Lady Maria had fallen asleep, until a sharp call brought her to her feet, and run to see what was wanted.

"You can take the paper and read to me. Not the foreign news—I know that—nor the speeches—lies, every word of them—something that will send me to sleep."

With shaking hands Miss Case unfolded the sheet and was hesitating between a description of a new invention for curling the hair and a notice of somebody's travels in Asia Minor, when the man-servant brought in cards.

"A lady and gentleman to see your ladyship on business."

"I can't see any one," declared Lady Maria peevishly.

"I'm resting—don't you know I always rest at this time? And I won't have visitors in winter—their thick boots wear out my carpet. Who are they? What do they want? Read me the names, Case—I can't find my glass——"

"Mr Fenwick," read Miss Case, taking the cards from her hand, "Mrs Fenwick."

"Why didn't you say before, you dolt!" cried her patroness, starting up. "Show them in at once. Case, you can sit in the bedroom till they are gone. Let me hear you put the key in the lock outside, and close the door. I'll not have you listening at the keyhole. If you get cold in your ear, you'll be deaf and stupider than ever, if that is possible. Be off with you!"

Miss Case, with an inarticulate bleat of protest, pattered out of the room, almost running into Claud Fenwick and Honor as she went.

Lady Maria stood by the table in the middle of the room without word or gesture of greeting, while the man set chairs. The keen look was again on her face. Once more she was the old hawk, scenting danger, uncertain how to meet it, ready to strike or to turn as she might find need. Her tired sunken eyes scanned the two faces.

Claud was thin and worn, and the grey threads were thick in the hair above his temples, but there was a quiet cheerfulness in his eyes, the look of a man who has faced some great crisis and made his decision for good and ill.

Over Honor, who stood beside him, her hand on his sound arm, some indefinable change had passed. The elusive air that made her appear to belong to another world was gone; the elfin bride had turned into a woman of middle earth.

No one spoke or moved until the man-servant's footsteps died away upon the stairs; then Lady Maria flung out one word—

"Well?" It was not peremptorily or impatiently spoken, as in the morning to the counsel, but wearily, almost despairingly. She sat down on the sofa as she spoke, signing to them to sit opposite to her.

"We have come to take leave of your ladyship," said Fenwick, paying no heed to the gesture.

"You are going into the country?"

"We are going to India?"

"To India?" Lady Maria's faced quivered, and the long hands lying on her knees clenched upon the edge of her shawl. "You are going to India—in Tufton's place?"

"In Tufton's place."

"I heard his fool of a father had begged him off at the last moment. They offered it to another young fellow who could not be ready to sail at once, and they were much annoyed and did not know where to put their hand on a likely man. I thought—but you are going of your own accord."

Lady Maria covered her eyes with her hand, leaning her elbow on the table, then suddenly looked up at Fenwick with a sharp "Why?"

"We have been thinking and talking together," said Fenwick, answering Lady Maria, but without taking his eyes off Honor, "and we think the best way is for Honor to remain dead. If we tried to obtain a legal decision about our marriage, there seems great uncertainty as to what it would be, and Honor agrees with me in not wishing to do anything that may injure Lady Elystan or her child."

"How about your own children?" asked Lady Maria hoarsely.

"It would be to no one's interest to prove them illegitimate; there is no chance of their inheriting properties or titles, and they will always be able to show the certificate of our marriage."

"And in what name was she married to you, eh?" The harsh tones grew harsher. A light flush spread over Honor's face.

"I believed Lester to be her real name," said Fenwick shortly. "She told me that her father's name was Basset, and I stupidly misunderstood——"

The cackling laugh echoed through the dusk. "So you thought her a love-child, and were too decent to say anything about it? You're a bigger fool than I thought you, if that's possible."

"I called myself Honor Lester when I ran away from Sir Charles," said Honor quickly. "It was my fault that Claud did not understand——"

"Stop gabbling, child," said Lady Maria fretfully. "Let me think how it is——"

She leaned her head again on her hand for some moments, her lips moving, but no words audible.

"You are taking a great risk," she said at last, shivering as if she were cold.

"Not so great a risk as it seems. It would be to no one's interest to identify Honor Fenwick with Honor Basset. Sir Charles, for his own sake, will do nothing that might cast a doubt upon his marriage with Lady Elystan. Honor has no relations to give her a thought except the Rivers, and for their own sakes they would not wish her to be proved alive after they had inherited her fortune."

"Ay, the fortune," broke in Lady Maria; "do you mean to leave it for that scoundrelly attorney to enjoy?"

"From all I can hear, he has not much capacity for enjoying it," said Fenwick grimly. "We do not propose to go to law with him for it."

"There's nothing like making a virtue of necessity," observed Lady Maria; "by the time the lawyers had decided who was to have it, every penny would be gone in legal expenses."

She fumbled among the sofa cushions for her snuff-box, and having taken a long pinch, sat erect and looked as she had not looked since the day when she brought Fenwick from St James's Square. "What do you say, child?" she asked, turning upon Honor. "He speaks for you as well as for himself do you agree, or is it only that you cannot help yourself?"



"I agree with all that he says." The answer came quietly and steadfastly. "Honor Basset is dead and buried."

"And you are going with him to India?"

"I am."

Lady Maria's eyes narrowed to two slits, almost disappearing among her wrinkles. "Do you realise that if you grow sickly and ugly in that climate, and he sees something that he fancies better, he can prove you were married in a false name, and turn you adrift?"

"Since you take such a kindly interest in our concerns, madam," broke in Fenwick, "you may be glad to know that I have made a settlement upon Honor which, I am told, cannot be set aside in any circumstances."

Honor smiled at him with a look of perfect confidence. "Claud has given up so much for me that I do not think he will want to cast me adrift. '*Dearest is dearest*,' my old nurse used to say."

Claud smiled down on her in answer, forgetting Lady Maria, who sat grim and mute.

"And if I grow old and changed, there is the less risk of my being recognised, ten or fifteen years hence, when we come home."

"When you come home—if you come home, you mean," interrupted Lady Maria with a strange defiant fierceness. "They die like flies in India. That is why I was thinking of getting Tufton's appointment for you. If you were both to die——"

"We are much obliged to your ladyship, but as you have heard, I have anticipated your kind offices. Good-day to you." Fenwick turned to the door.

"It's easy to blame an old woman," said Lady Maria

querulously. "I don't want you to die, so long as you will keep out of the way. I always liked you much better than Mendip, but he is my grandson, and I was bound to do my best for my own flesh and blood. Well, well, it's all settled now, and it was none of my doing. Honor Mendip is dead, as you say, and if any one questions it, you can tell him to go and look at her memorial tablet in the church—what is its name?—where the attorney used to carry round the plate on Sundays. Egerton and Jane Rivers put it up, and it was done from Egerton's design. He told me they could not make up their minds upon a text. 'I'll give you one,' I told him—'*Honor among thieves.*' It took ten minutes for him to break it to me that there was no such text in the Bible. He sent me a Bible with texts marked next day, and a letter to say I should find it a comfort when I came to lie upon my death-bed. I told him I was much obliged, but I meant to drive in his carriage for many years, and to die standing, as the men of my house did. But there's the Bible, and I make Case read it to herself for a quarter of an hour when she's been telling me lies."

"Honor, it is time for us to go back to Jermyn Street," said Claud decisively. "Cousin Louisa will be waiting."

Lady Maria stood up, gaunt and haggard. In spite of all, there was something of dignity about her.

"When do you sail?"

"We go down to Southampton to-morrow; the ship may not sail until Christmas Day."

"I suppose a good woman would say 'God bless you'; it's not for me to say it. Good-bye to you; you both have had your share of trouble and ill-usage. Perhaps there may be good luck waiting for

you in India." She curtsied to them as they went out. "You're a brace of fools, and fools sometimes prosper, in spite of their best efforts; so there is hope for you."

On the afternoon of Christmas Day, Lady Maria sat alone by her fire, having sent Miss Case to church.

"I wonder what will become of those two? They must be cold and miserable enough by now." She shivered and stretched out her hands to the flicker in the grate. "That child said it—'*dearest is dearest.*' What would I not have given if I could have gone out into the world to seek my fortune with the one man seventy years ago?"

Her chin dropped upon her breast, and she stared blindly at the fire.

On the deck of their ship Fenwick and Honor watched the shore of England receding, until mist and darkness hid it from their sight.

THE END.





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